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**Consciência social em filmes seleccionados de Mira  
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**Social Awareness in Selected Films by Mira Nair**



**Universidade de Aveiro** Departamento de Línguas e Culturas  
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For my group for their support and companionship.

## **o júri**

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## **palavras-chave**

consciência social, mulher, crianças, miséria, diáspora, casta, identidade, família, globalização, pós-colonial

## **resumo**

O presente trabalho propõe-se a analisar três filmes de diferentes períodos da carreira de Mira Nair, *Salaam Bombay!*, *Monsoon Wedding* e *The Namesake*. Para dar cumprimento a esta tarefa procedo a uma contextualização histórica da vida e obra da realizadora desde o seu nascimento até á actualidade.

Seguidamente, procedo à análise de aspectos de consciência social e os meios técnicos utilizados por Mira Nair para chamar atenção para os aspectos sociais nos seus filmes, tais como a importância do uso da cor, a música, a abertura dos filmes, as performances dos actores, a comunicação não verbal e os códigos de vestuário.

Eu também foco as vulnerabilidades das crianças e das mulheres, assim como o uso das drogas e faço alguns paralelos com a actualidade. Seguidamente apresento um pequeno estudo sobre o sistema de castas e a religião na Índia a sua importância e peso na sociedade Indiana. Depois disso introduzo alguma informação sobre diáspora Indiana e mostro como estes assuntos são lidados e problematizados nos filmes de Mira Nair.

**keywords**

social awareness, woman, children, misery, diaspora, caste, identity, family, globalization, postcolonial

**abstract**

This thesis aims to analyse three Mira Nair films from different periods of her career, *Salaam Bombay!*, *Monsoon Wedding* and *The Namesake*. To accomplish my task I provide a historical contextualization of the life and work of the film director from her birth till the present day.

Then, I carry out an analysis of her social awareness and the technical and narrative features which Mira Nair uses to draw attention to social issues in her films, such as the importance of the use of colour, the arresting openings of the films, the performances of the actors, non-verbal communication and dress codes.

I also focus on the vulnerabilities of children and women in her work, as well as on drug abuse, and make a few parallels with how things are today. Then I present a brief survey of the caste system and religion in India and their traditional importance to and effects on Indian society. After that I introduce some information about the Indian diaspora, and show how these issues are problematised and dealt with in Nair's films.

# Social Awareness in Selected Films by Mira Nair

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## Introduction

The first time I saw a Mira Nair's film was the film *The Namesake*. Before I had seen it, I was (in a way) in the grip of a certain prejudice about what Indian cinema was like. When I thought about Indian cinema, the first thing that came to my mind was music and dance and I thought (wrongly) that it functioned exclusively as a medium of mass popular "entertainment." However after seeing *The Namesake* I felt some curiosity to know more about Mira Nair. I was fascinated by her apparent simplicity in directing the actors, her desire to try to portray an unpretentious realism. She is indeed influenced quite a lot by Bollywood; most of her films make use of music, colour and dancing. The idea of film analysis is an interesting one however it is interesting to notice how ideas have been changing throughout the times, Freud, for example, who only went to the cinema once,

regarded the new technology of film as a quasi-pornographic medium that was antithetical to his scientific project. Freud may have spurned the movies, but filmmakers have been irresistibly drawn to his insights - with a good deal more success, one might add, than other artists such as photographers and specially painters. What filmmakers have found particularly intriguing is Freud's idea that the visible, public, present behavior of individuals often screens a hidden, private, past truth - often a trauma or transgression - that can be uncovered only by the perspicacious analyst/detective. As Stephen Heath suggests, the "fascination of so many films with psychoanalysis" is symptomatic of the "powerful social desire to bring...analysis into sight" (Black, 2002:62).

Nonetheless films have over the years been important vehicles for offering social commentary and that is particularly true for Indian cinema. According to Marlene Campos's translation of the book *Film* by Ronald Bergan,

...o cinema hindi desenvolvera quase imperceptivelmente uma tradição de filmes socialmente conscientes. Fundados em 1934, os Bombay Talkies Studio produziram numerosos filmes desses. Contudo



apenas nos anos 50 os filmes indianos começaram a ser exibidos no mundo.. O mais proeminente dos primeiros realizadores-produtores do mundo foi Dadasaheb Phalke, que introduziu o filme mitológico, povoado de deuses e deusas do panteão indiano. Todos os papéis eram desempenhados por homens, já que as mulheres estavam proibidas de actuar na altura. Mas Phalke foi arruinado pela introdução do som que num país com 18 línguas principais e mais de 800 dialectos, inevitavelmente resultou numa fragmentação da indústria e no seu dispersar em diferentes mercados linguísticos. Bombaim, o original centro da indústria, continuou a dominar, centrando-se em filmes em Hindi, a língua mais falada (...) em 1988, *Salaam Bombay!* de Mira Nair, tornou-se um enorme sucesso internacional (Campos, 2008:242-245).

According to Lúcia Almeida, statistics show that India produced 833 films in 1984 (Almeida, 1997:11) and continues to produce a lot of films nowadays so the influence that they can have on people is not surprising. “Cinema was the first institution to permit Indians to participate as citizens irrespective of caste and other differences” (Gokulsing, Dissanayake, 2004:2). This way cinema contributed to the breaking down of the caste system in India; while working on cinema there were no barriers. Cinema is for this reason a good way to study a society and “cinema not only reflects culture, it also shapes culture. When we consider Indian films, we see how they have promoted modernization, westernization, urbanization, new ways of life, the emancipation of women and the rights of minorities and in particular the relationship between Hindus and Muslims” (Gokulsing, Dissanayake, 2004:20).

Because it is not the cinema of a region, unlike all other cinema in India, Hindi cinema has always attracted actors, writers, directors, producers, and other personnel from diverse linguistic regions in India; it is as if Hindi cinema were too big and important to be left only to Hindi speakers. For this and other reasons, the language used in Hindi cinema has been all kinds of Hindi, inflected by numerous other Indian languages and dialects: from Urdu earlier spoken by a section of the old north Indian aristocracy including its accomplished courtesans to rural Bhojpuri spoken by the poor peasants in eastern Pradesh (...) Hindi cinema has in recent

years taken another linguistic turn, which is both postcolonial and global, to use more and more English words or, through frequent code mixing, a mixture of Hindi and English sometimes called “Hinglish” (Krishnaswamy & Hawley, 2008: 202-203).

We can see this linguistic turn in Mira’s films such as *Salaam Bombay!* which was her first feature film and made in Hindi but her later films used mainly English as is the case with *The Namesake* and *Monsoon Wedding*.

Cinema in India is seen as the dominant form of “Indian public culture, in the formation of the culture of the cosmopolitan middle-class in India.” Jigna Desai also states that Bollywood is very important to second - generation South Asian Americans in respect of “social belonging, familial connections, transnational ties, linguistic fluency and cultural knowledge.” It is important to have cultural authenticity and fluency and this is achieved “through the consumption of Bollywood films.” However film is “unique in the ways it constructs a shared south Asian diasporic identity” and even those who seldom watch films are provided with much of the vocabulary for “understanding culture, authenticity, the nation, and cultural difference.” Jigna Desai also gives the example of the film *American Desi* in which Krishna changes his name to Kris he is an “assimilated or white-washed Indian American who avoids socializing with other American Indians” (Davé *et al*, 2005: 61-62). However, while here Krishna denies clearly his Indianness, in the film *The Namesake* Gogol that also was named Nikhill and preferred to be called Nick never had clearly show his anti-Indianness. What makes Krishna’s transformation “into south Asian American social communities is his love for an Indian woman” ( Davé *et al*, 2005:62) while what precipitated Gogol’s return to his Indian roots was his father death.

Indian cinema has always been very important and is more so now that Indians are becoming very important and powerful in the United States. There are now so many Indians in America, that they have achieved a considerable visibility. They are even characterized in the TV series *The Simpsons*. It is worth commenting briefly on Apu’s representative characterization of the Indian community in *The Simpsons*. Shakur & Sousa, while writing about Apu, say that

although he has appeared in numerous episodes of *The Simpsons*, only around five centre on Apu himself.

Apu is the South Asian immigrant in small town America, not a member of any Asian community in downtown Springfield, but the lone South Asian shopkeeper and owner of the Kwik-E-Mart, the 24 hours a day, 7 days a week mini-supermarket frequented by all the characters of *The Simpsons*. In due course he acquires a south Asian “arranged” wife, Manjula,



**Apu and Manjula 1**

and we meet his brother Sanjay, and his mother, but otherwise Apu’s ‘cultural space’ is largely a personal one, centred around his counter and shelves. There are numerous ‘authenticating’ stereotypes to his performativity, notably his dress and appearance (and that of Manjula), his absurd South Asian accent, and the repeated references to his ‘exotic’ Hindu beliefs, and veganism (Shakur & D’Sousa, 2003:164).

That is to say, that the Indian community in America has achieved such a high profile in America that it finds representation in Apu and his family. The over-numerous offspring might be said to echo impressions of Indian over-population but the narrative makes it clear it was achieved through the very western method of fertility drugs and in vitro technologies for a couple actually with infertility troubles.

It is generally known that many films deal with people’s fears, anxieties, dreams and the hardship of their lives, among other things. Mira Nair has a developed sense of the dominant social issues of her native India and she tries to transfer them to the screen. To carry out my work, before I have analyzed my chosen films in detail, it was fundamental to get an overview of Mira Nair’s work to see how her life experience has impacted on her artistic vision. This work is

structured in four sections. The first attempts to give the reader a global overview of Nair's work and her life. I will offer a historical contextualization, in order to explain how she began her career as a director, in order to place Nair in her uniquely hybrid Indian/American cinematic context. Mira Nair used to be an actress and when she made her first feature film, she tried to be true to the spontaneity, freshness and improvisational nature of her original career choice.

Mira Nair is a very prolific director so I have decided to restrict myself to three of her films that, in my opinion, have more to do with her personal relationship with India and with her manifest social conscience: her first film *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), and *The Namesake* (2006). Nair has directed five documentaries and fifteen films within this same time-frame. We also have *Migration* which was released in 2007, in which she uses once again her "favourite" actor Irrfan Khan. In this short film which lasts about fourteen minutes, Nair shows once again her social concern, this time on the topic of AIDS. The film is in Hindi and it was one of the four films directed by acclaimed Indian directors to raise awareness about AIDS in India. Nair uses a funeral as the opening of the film. In this way she manages to draw the viewer's attention from the beginning to the global problem that is AIDS. According to S. Newman *et al* and according to a study about *Marriage, monogamy and HIV: a profile of HIV-infected women in south India*:

"A retrospective study was conducted on 134 HIV-infected females evaluated at an HIV/AIDS centre in south India to characterize their socio-demographics, HIV risk factors and initial clinical presentations. The mean age was 29 years; 81% were housewives; 95% were currently or previously married; 89% reported heterosexual sex as their only HIV risk factor; and 88% reported a history of monogamy. The majority were of reproductive age, thus the potential for vertical transmission of HIV and devastating impacts on families is alarming. Nearly half of these women initially presented asymptotically implying that partner recruitment can enable early HIV detection. Single partner heterosexual sex with their husband was the only HIV risk factor for the majority of women. HIV prevention and intervention strategies need to focus on married,

monogamous Indian women whose self-perception of HIV risk may be low, but whose risk is inextricably linked to the behaviour of their husbands”

Before *Migration*, Nair had already focus on certain features of Indian marriage practices, not in relation to HIV but in relation to arranged marriages - in the film *Monsoon Wedding*.

The second, third and fourth sections are about my understanding of how these three Nair films address some of the leading issues facing contemporary Indians. These issues include poverty and social exclusion, the caste system and the disequilibrium associated with the Indian diaspora. As film is a sensuous medium, and Indian cinema perhaps more given to sensual indulgence than many other national cinemas (see how Michael Powell is seduced by his imagined Indian settings in *Black Narcissus* (1946), the importance of the use of colour, music, dance, the arresting openings of her films, the performances of the actors, non-verbal communication, and dress codes will all be looked at in some detail.

*Salaam Bombay!* (1988) was Mira Nair’s first feature film and it deals with misery, child labour and drugs. The children in the film were not actors because she “*tried to work with real life*”<sup>1</sup> (Nair’s words). I decided to centre my attention principally on the main character Krishna. However I also intend to talk about Indian cinema and cinema in general in broader terms, expressly in relation to Nair’s use of documentary realism, I also intend to focus on the situation of children at that time. I am also going to offer a brief contextualization of Indian history to place its long-standing association with endemic poverty and the recent economic growth of India in the spotlight and give also some information on drugs. It might also be useful to present some facts about the importance given to the English language in modern India since linguistic issues are at the heart of Nair’s films.

*Monsoon Wedding* is a film that focuses on the modernity vs. tradition debate and centres on an arranged marriage between an Indian woman (Aditi) and an Americanized man (Hemant), the influences on whom mostly come from

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<sup>1</sup> In *Salaam Bombay!*(1988) DVD director’s audio commentary

abroad. Is it important to love someone before marrying him/her, as we are led to believe in the west? I intend to present a brief historical contextualization of the caste system in India and its weight in Indian society – as caste presents an interesting side-plot in *Monsoon Wedding*. I also think it is important to talk about religion as well as immigration and the role of women and its implications for the daily lives of Indians.

The film *The Namesake* is based in the novel by Jhumpa Lahiri and focuses on an issue that, although at first sight may seem to bring nothing new, continues to concern the human being: *who am I? Where do I belong? Why do people have such different cultural conventions and practices? Is there a right and a wrong side to cultural difference?* One aspect of this multiculturalist debate is seen in the use of language in the film because it is spoken in different languages. In this film I also intend to introduce some information about the Indian Diaspora which may contribute to a better understanding of the film's characters' dilemmas. This film deals mainly with a family of middle/upper class professional people, who have all their basic needs fulfilled, nevertheless the suffering which Gogol goes through after his father death is what many people face when a family member dies. This is a different kind of suffering, not really related with the hardship of the poor which we saw in *Salaam Bombay!* but it is also important. According to Norman Paul and George Grosser in the article *Operational Mourning and its role in conjoint family therapy* in many places of the world people are prepared for death through rituals or through explanations of life and death. However western rationality has made us lose these ceremonies and rituals. In the modern era our short mourning ceremonials which are many times hidden from children makes it difficult to provide a catharsis for this experience (Norman et al, 1965: 339-340). Gogol had to have time for his mourning to be worked through.

I'm going to show how the external socio-economic issues, like also her private life, influenced Nair's work.

Finally, I intend to explain what I believe Mira Nair's approach to these questions is, and to offer support for my conclusions from within and from outside her filmic texts. Some may ask what authority Nair has to speak about these (I'd like to write minorities but unfortunately they are) majorities in India, since she is a

privileged and well-educated person. However I don't intend to take that line because I think that choosing to do what she has done has given voice to a lot of people that might otherwise be forgotten. I will also analyze the films for their complexity and artistry, arguing that it is these things, apart from the timelessness of her themes, that if anything will make her films last.

## Chapter 1:

### Mira Nair- A Contextualization (Her Life and Work)

Mira Nair was born on October 15, 1957. She lived for many years in Bhubareshwar, the capital of Orissa. *Pather Panchali* was Mira's inspiration "to become a filmmaker". She said that "all you could see were Hindi movies, which were the traditional films of India" (Muir, 2006:21-22).



Mira Nair 2

Mira is a Punjabi, from one of the most prosperous regions in India and was born into the upper-middle class family of a civil servant, the daughter of an Indian administrative officer (Amrit Nair) and his wife (Praveen), who "has lived a life of good work...her social consciousness seems to have been transmitted from the sterling example set by Praveen" Muir gives a justification to Mira's determination

Amrit (Mira's father) advocated stopping at two offspring, and reportedly felt embarrassed by the fact that his wife became expectant with a third. He sent her to a clinic, but Praveen did not go through with the procedure. As the Lahr article points out, this was, perhaps, an early indicator that Mira Nair was a spirit determined to have her way, and she has been equally determined in other pursuits throughout her whole life. Her first such dedication in childhood, was, no doubt, her quest to receive the best education possible (Muir, 2008: 23).



When Mira was eleven years old, the Nair family transferred to Delhi (Muir, 2006: 23). Probably this was part of the inspiration for her film *Monsoon Wedding* which occurs in Delhi.

Mira was brought up in an “Indian household, but one which still very much remembers the British empire” (Muir, 2006:23). By thirteen, Nair attended an Irish-catholic missionary school. It was here that she reported “becoming steeped in English literature” and her reading list including William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, a novel she would one day adapt to the screen. On reaching adulthood, Nair also became deeply involved in acting. As education was not a priority in India “she was accepted on a full scholarship to Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts (Before, “she had turned down a full scholarship to Cambridge University, reportedly over a chip on her shoulder about the Brits”). There she found Sooni Taraporevala, with whom she “had a number of interests in common, they were collaborators on a number of important , projects including *Salaam Bombay*, *Mississippi Masala*, *My Own Country* and *The Namesake* (Muir, 2006:24, 26). *Mississippi Masala* (1991) focuses on an explosive plot involving African-American and Indian-American communities in the American South. The title says everything “masala”, as is said in the film, is a “bunch of hot spices.” That is why the film could not be reduced merely to Meena’s father’s (Jay) obsession with returning to Uganda, that he at first considered the only place which he could call home. While leaving Uganda, Okelo (brought up with Jay) asks Meena not to forget Swahili and it is interesting to notice that after Okelo had said this to Meena, at the airport, while the children are waiting to go to London, they sing in English. Singing, which is used a lot by Nair, functions here almost as a warning that Meena will never speak in Swahili again. The importance given to language is a recurrent feature in Mira Nair’s Film.

In a wedding in *Monsoon Wedding* a man says that although they are far from India “we should never forget our roots, our culture, our traditions” While talking to Demetrius Meena tells him that over the years she had been “ three years in Mississippi, before in London and before in Africa, but never in India” This raises the question that Nair asks often, that of maintaining traditions having never even been to their ancestors’ birthplace, in this case, India. Meena tells

Demetrius's father what Africa was like and Demetrius's father asks: "How come they got Indians in Africa?" Meena answers: "The British brought them to build the railway (...) that's how my grandfather came, then the railway was finished and he stayed on. I've never been to India" Demetrius's father answers: "You are like us - we are from Africa, but we never been there before either." Meena is also considered "dark" for an Indian. That is to say that the prejudice many people have to catalogue people by the colour of their skin, continues to persist nowadays. According to an article by Travis Loller, quoting Joni Hersch, it states:

a government survey of 2,084 legal immigrants to the United States from around the world and found that those with the lightest skin earned an average of 8 percent to 15 percent more than similar immigrants with much darker skin. "On average, being one shade lighter has about the same effect as having an additional year of education," Hersch said. The study also found that taller immigrants earn more than shorter ones, with an extra inch of height associated with a 1 percent increase in income (...) Hersch took into consideration other factors that could affect wages, such as English-language proficiency, education, occupation, race or country of origin, and found that skin tone still seemed to make a difference in earnings. That means that if two similar immigrants from Bangladesh, for example, came to the United States at the same time, with the same occupation and ability to speak English, the lighter-skinned immigrant would make more money on average. "I thought that once we controlled for race and nationality, I expected the difference to go away, but even with people from the same country, the same race — skin color really matters," she said, "and height."

Mira Nair also became involved in the theatre program at Harvard, and won a Boylston Prize for her performance of Jocasta's speech from Seneca's *Oedipus*. In 1997 she took a photography course at Harvard with Mitch Epstein, who later became Nair's first husband (Muir, 2006: 27).

According to Mirabai Films home page throughout the years Nair has been a very prolific director moving from Hollywood to independent cinema. She

belongs to two successful non-profit organisations. In 1988 she used the profits of *Salaam Bombay* to create the Salaam Baalak Trust which has directly impacted government policy on street children in India. 20 years later, the trust's 25 centers provide a safe and nurturing environment for 5000 street children annually. In 2005 Nair founded Maisha, a filmmakers' training program based in East Africa. In its 5 years of operation, Maisha has trained hundreds of students from Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania in screenwriting, directing, producing, acting, sound design, editing, and cinematography.

Nair has also been very important in the spreading of Indian culture throughout the world. "With the liberalization of the Indian economy, some migrant filmmakers such as Mehta and Nair returned their cameras to the homeland of India to explore the changes in cultural processes in urban middle-class culture in South Asia" (Desai, 2004: 50).

According to Foster, Nair belongs to the Asian diaspora, the Indian films of which are effectively marginalized by a predominantly white Western distribution system. Women from the Asian and African diaspora defy dominant cinema, which is mainly white, Eurocentric and male dominated (Foster, 1997:3). While giving an interview to John Lithgow Nair tells us that her first film was *Jama Masjid Street Journal* which was her Harvard thesis project. " This film explores the life of a traditional Muslim community from a western perspective and was originally conceived as a silent film. After graduation Nair moved to New York, where for six months she waitressed at night so that she could pursue her films ideas during the day." She also says that her parents said that she didn't exist in New York and that they were ashamed of her. After directing four documentaries her greatest recognition came with her first feature film *Salaam, Bombay!* She was awarded the Best New Director at the Cannes Film Festival, as well as a nomination for best foreign film at the Academy Awards.

She directed several films and documentaries; among them we might briefly look at the mainstream westernized feminist movie, *Hysterical Blindness* (2002). The title was very well chosen because it is like a summing up of Debbie's state of mind and it is also a medical reference that Nair visualizes in the opening scene. The plot centres on two girls that every night go to a bar to search for love.

The film begins with an eye check; Debbie has lost her vision for some moments and the doctor tells her that it happened due to stress. Uma Thurman performs in an excellent way an emotionally disturbed woman who wants desperately a man who will love her. However in that search she sometimes doesn't respect herself. The loss of vision acts as a mirror for herself, a person who is rarely in focus.

When she is literally begging for Rick's love who from the beginning is clear that he hasn't any interest in her and turns her down, she starts to lose control and asks the bartender: "What's wrong with me?" and he answers: " Maybe you don't see things so clearly." Here a reference to the title itself.

The plot centres on women's search for love, namely Debby, her friend, Beth, who is a single mother, and Virginia (Debby's mother). Finally Virginia, who had been left by Debby's father, finds her love (Nick) who wants her to go with him to Florida. However when she is just about to arrive at happiness Nick dies of a heart attack. In this film we don't have the bright and colourful settings that many times are a characteristic of Nair's and she in an interview by David Geffner <sup>2</sup> she explains why:

You cannot impose color on a story if it's not inherent to the characters," Nair said. "This is a working-class New Jersey neighborhood and I wanted to be very truthful to that reality." Nair said that her discussions with production designer Stephanie Carroll went back to the central visual motif of blindness. "We used a lot of refracting surfaces in the design that were placed in the foreground of each shot," Nair said. "We used vinyl walls for Debby's basement room, which is typical of the late '80s period. So is all the chrome and leather, the big hairstyle and heavy makeup, which I loved doing. Setting the look for a period piece, working closely with the extras on makeup and fingernail polish in the bar scenes was great fun for me."

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.dga.org/news/v27\\_3/feat\\_mira\\_nair.php3](http://www.dga.org/news/v27_3/feat_mira_nair.php3)

In the last scenes Virginia's redecorating of the living room is a sign of her caring for herself and is in a way a homage to Nick who encouraged her to live and enjoy life even in less important things such as the redecoration of a living room.

The film concludes with a feature characteristic of most of Nair's films, a hopeful ending in which she doesn't judge but rather leaves a sign of hope in the future. This characteristic will also be seen in her film *Vanity Fair* in which she adapts the ending in a different way from the original book in order to soften it. In the finale of *Hysterical blindness*, they are all in Virginia's garden watching Beth's daughter dancing and they start singing and dancing as if they were finally at peace with themselves, as if they only needed each other to be happy.

Another Nair film is *Vanity Fair* ( 2004), this film was based on the novel written by William Makepeace Thackeray. The plot is about the story of two friends, Amelia Sedley (from a good family) and Rebecca Sharp ( an orphan) and their variable positions on the social ladder. The film begins when Rebecca is still a child and meets the man whom many years later she will meet again, Lord Steyne. She in a way loses her soul when due to necessity she sells the picture of her mother to him. From this point on, there was no way back. In a way it is as if Amelia, who was a good heart, at the end finds love once again with Dobbin but Rebecca can only find the renewal of her lost fortune with the preposterous Josh Sedley in India.

Antonija Primorac, makes an interesting analysis of the adaptation of Nair's film:

The adaptation is analyzed as a contemporary reading of Thackeray's novel which in an attempt to reaffirm the role of India in 19th century Britain ends up reiterating narrative uses of the colonies in the Victorian mainstream novel paradoxically not even present in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. The Victorian narrative uses of the colonies in question are the use of colony as a space for new beginnings (especially for disgraced men and fallen women, e.g. in Dickens or Eliot) by presenting a new ending greatly departing from the novel with Rebecca Sharp riding " into the Indian sunset" on an elephant with Joss by her side, and as a place of retreat from the restrictions of the " civilized" society and mores of the

imperial metropolis (major Dobbin' s " going native" in India which bears no resemblance to the description of his military service in the very British surroundings of his army barracks overseas as described by Thackeray). In addition, the foregrounding of India in the film through visual emphasis on the presence of Indians and things Indian in early 19th century Britain departing from the original text (Joss's personal servant, an Indian-themed garden party, a Bollywood-style dance scene, and an image of an idealised Indian nuclear family inserted in the scene of Dobbin' s letter-writing to Amelia) is analyzed as a strategy that again paradoxically further exoticizes the presence of India and Indianness. The foregrounding is analyzed as counterproductive because it relies on the already established (visual, cultural) orientalist representational stereotypes of the exotic, thus failing in its attempt to reaffirm and stress the ordinariness of Indian presence in everyday life of 19th century Britain (Primorac,2007:1).

Nair once more chose to direct a film that although not directly has a subtext heavy with the presence of India. In my opinion the title is exemplified in the figure of Miss Pinkerton, who while drifting in the worlds of history and imagination finds it romantic that a couple should run away to marry because they belong two different social strata. However in the end when she discovers that the indigent governess Becky has married her nephew Rawdon, she is not able to forgive them and refuses to open the doors of her house to them.

Afterwards, in 2008 she directed the film *8* (the segment: *How can it be?*) In this film she deals brilliantly with gender equality, she defends women rights to live as they wish. The opening scene is very well done because we are wrongly led to think that it is a film about women who are victim of bad treatment because the camera goes from a general view of the outside of a block of apartments to enter a couple bedroom. There we see a man who wants to make love with his wife but is rejected. Afterwards, she wakes her son and says she has to go and that she leaves him a CD so that he could listen to it when he misses her. Before going she says to his husband: " We need to formalize the divorce." And he says: "I don't want to talk about that. You know that women beg not to be divorced, not the other way around? Why do you choose to live with a man with whom you need to share

your love?” and she answers: “Is it going to be so terrible? It could be a mistake but I’ve got to do it. I’m in love with him, Harif” Desperately Harif begs: “Stay with me! Sleep with him but stay with me!” She answers: “That will be adultery” Harif says: “Be dishonest with Ala, he can handle it, you have a child choose him! If you leave you won’t live only without your son, you’ll go without God.” Finally she leaves and Harif says to his son: “She is gone. How can it be?” And Hunna answers: “But it is!” Hunna goes to his bedroom and listens to her mother’s CD. Among other things she has to say, she finishes saying: “... words I hope will mean something to you like integrity, like courage, and forgive me adventure, the belief in something you start.” This film, which is a segment of the film 8, makes an appeal for gender equality.

Lately, she has directed two films *New York I love You* ( 2009) and *Amelia* (2009). *New York* is a co-production of several directors. Here in this film Nair shows why she is so well known as a director who has won so many prizes. We are involved in the story. The plot centres on an Orthodox Jewish woman (Natalie Portman) negotiating a diamond sale with a Jain dealer (Irrfan Khan). This eight - minute film is very dense because while they’re talking with each other, they cover several aspects of New York society such as food and dietary restrictions, religion, love and while they are speaking it seems as if their lives are interconnected. That is to say, the woman because is Jewish has had to shave her hair and wear a wig and the Jain dealer’s wife had decided that the marriage was a “sin” and went to India and shave her hair too. The woman while talking about her hair says: “ ...25 years to grow and ten minutes to cut off.” The man replies: “...you could be wearing my wife’s hair by now...most Jewish hair in America comes from our Indian temples in India...”. While talking about their food restrictions and religion (the woman had said he was a Hindu but he gently corrected her saying that he was a Jain); the man says: “ no onion, no garlic...” The woman says “ no pig, no shrimp..only the Christians eat everything, they’re like the Chinese they never have to spend any time picking a restaurant.” While they were talking there waensued a flirtation that ended in mutual attraction. It was a cross-cultural attraction of opposites. This short conversation was so dense that when the

woman is at her wedding ceremony she imagines her husband as the Jain dealer and he also imagines her as his wife dressed with Indian clothes.

Her latest film *Amelia* ( 2009) tells the story of the pilot Amelia Earhart, performed by Hillary Swank, with Richard Gere as George Putnam and Ewan McGregor as Gene Vidal. The film begins with the image of a plane and then we have a flashback of Amelia when she was a child, in which we are told of her desire to fly. The film tells the story of her life since she met George who later becomes her husband, the affair which she had with Gene Vidal and her fatal world trip with Fred, who was an alcoholic. The film ends with pictures and films of the true Amelia Earhart and with a text that reads:

Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan vanished somewhere over the Pacific Ocean on July 2, 1937. The U.S government mounted the largest rescue mission in history, but no evidence of the Electra was found. The fate of Amelia Earhart has intrigued the world for generations.

However, in my opinion, this is one of her worst films because although it had to follow a prescribed course because it is based on a true story and has some potential for creating a compelling symbol of freedom and proto-feminist pluck, complete with a genuinely tragic ending. However it fails for being so shallow and clichéd; we are not engaged by Amelia's desire for flight.

Mira Nair is a brilliant woman who has given proof of her talent in her documentaries and films which, as I have said before, show a great concern with social issues so I'm going to quote a paragraph written by Mira Nair herself in which she writes about what she faced after 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001:

(...)I have been reflecting on the torrent of ceaseless images flooding our lives: in the print media, TV and of course, in our popular cinema, ultimately asking myself the age-old questions Ter Braak raises in his still radical essay: what is the role of an artist in any society? What is the place and future of cinema in the world today? In the "global village" of incessant images, increasingly I see the failure of mass media to impart



actual understanding. This overactive pluralism gives one the illusion of knowing a lot about a lot when actually you know a smattering about nothing at all, leaving in its wake an audience so thoroughly bludgeoned by little bits of information that one is left confused and consequently apathetic politically (...) now more than ever we need cinema to reveal our tiny local worlds in all their glorious particularity (...) (Nair, 2006: 103).

Although the first part contains some commonplace reflections, the latter part reveals her desire to break through the undifferentiated and mediatised information shower and find some local “lived” truths to tell. This is not an easy thing to do when you are very much part of that media circus. Nair currently lives in New York City and Kampala, Uganda with her husband and son.

## **Chapter 2:**

### ***Salaam Bombay!* (1988)**

#### **1. Documentary Realism comes to Mumbai**

According to the book *Mercy in her Eyes* by John Kenneth Muir, the *Salaam Bombay* project's origins went back to 1983-1984 while they were shooting *India Cabaret*. While working on that documentary, Nair lived with two dancers in their small apartment, and it was in that environment that she encountered a small tea boy, and always remembered him. That of a tea boy would be Krishna's first job when he arrives Bombay (Krishna is *Salaam Bombay*'s main juvenile character).

According to a study made to check the improvement of life of children at that time between 1978 and 1982 and later between 1990 and 1992, they came to the conclusion that they weren't achieving their goals. This study reveals the statistical evidence which Nair was showing fictionally in her film, the precariousness and misery in which so many children were living. However the study also reveals that "real improvements have been noted in infant mortality rates" (Vanita, 1993:4). Moreover we can see her ability to anticipate the immediate future because unfortunately according to a statistic by the *Sharam centre for girls* children's situation in India nowadays continues to be very difficult for many.

Less than half of India's children between the age 6 and 14 go to school" and "poor and bonded families often "sell" their children to contractors who promise lucrative jobs in the cities and the children end up being employed in brothels, hotels and domestic work. Many run away and find a life on the streets.

According to an article by Ruchira Ganguli-Scrase that tries to understand young people's social world in an urban neighborhood in India, despite the investment

made in education in the last few years “formal qualifications are insufficient to gain access to desirable jobs” (Young, 2007: 324). Therefore India continues to have most of the problems it had 22 years earlier.

After the production of *India Cabaret*, Nair didn't know what project to do next and Sooni Taraporevala encouraged her to look for material in a different direction. According to Nair and Taraporevala's book about the film, the script's goal was to tell a story that “was not sentimental, but about the survival of the fittest, about children who have never known a childhood”(Muir,2006 :36). Some may say about *Salaam Bombay* that it brings nothing new but Nair not only tells a story, she carefully avoids patronizing her subjects and her audience. It was in a way the first step towards the recognition of India and of India's cinema by the west (apart from that of its distinguished art cinema) This recognition was confirmed 25 years later with the film *Who wants to be a millionaire* by Danny Boyle, with which we see our film has a lot of similarities, such as the main characters' jobs, the place where the majority of the scenes take place, Mumbai (formerly Bombay). Krishna falls in love with Sweet Sixteen, a girl brought to a bordello and in *Who wants to be a millionaire* Jamal Malik falls in love with a girl that is thought to be a prostitute but with whom he stays together at the end of the film. However, despite being fascinated by Sweet Sixteen, the fact is that life is so harsh for Krishna that it will be impossible for them to be together.



**Sweet Sixteen 3**

The image where we see Sweet Sixteen while she is going to meet a client looking through the car window is very powerful. In fact she is not looking at Krishna; she's looking at the pimp Baba under the suffering eye of Krishna who is watching. Between the two films, there has been a changing attitude towards India, according to the book *India Booms*. From Nixon's shocking commentary:

“What the Indians need (... ) is a mass famine” to Bush's attitude when he offered not just vocal but practical support to India's nuclear

aspirations (....) Even the more open-minded Clinton administration had treated India somewhat warily. So Bush's open embrace was a sea change indeed. On the one hand, westerners saw India as exotic and romantic (....) On the other hand there were westerners who were simply dismissive. Thomas Macaulay, who introduced India's first penal code, wrote that the entire body of Indian philosophy was worth less than a single bookshelf of European books. Winston Churchill was ruder still, describing India as a 'beastly country with a beastly religion' and 'no more a united country than the Equator' (...) western visitors to India see (...) the country's deep spirituality and (...) the flashy malls and designer shops in Mumbai, shoulder to shoulder with filth, overcrowding and poverty so intense it is hard to witness (Farndon, 2008:2-8).

It is difficult not to notice India's existence because of the number of its inhabitants and because a lot of jobs are outsourced to India. India is full of contradictions: "it has been a fully fledged nuclear power since 1998, but it is also home to 40 per cent of all the world's malnourished children" (Farndon, 2008:5). It was around this last issue that Nair was trying to build her film.

In respect of the nation's economy, only three years after the release of *Salaam Bombay* and once more according to Farndon:

In 1991, its foreign-exchange reserves dropped to virtually zero as the Gulf war triggered a rise in oil prices that effectively bankrupted the country. India had "slow growth in the first four decades of independence" but it was '...much faster than growth had been under the British, and it may have provided a more solid foundation for the growth that has followed than might at first seem apparent...Nehru made sure that English remained India's common language- and it is Indians' fluency with English that has helped them to make an impact in the international information technology and communications market that is way beyond that of China' (Farndon, 2008 :13-16).

It is interesting to notice that Nair used Hindi in the film and not English even though some may say that English would have reached a larger audience. It

was to my mind a good option because as it is a film about India, it is pertinent to use one of the numerous languages of India. In fact throughout the years, language has been a much debated issue and the cause of conflicts, such as that of the Tamils (from Tamilnadu, one of the 28 states in India) who fought against the “newcomer from the north,” due to their beliefs in the purity of the language meaning they were against Hindi. In 1965 the constituent assembly determined that Hindi would be the official language of India. However, only a minority speak Hindi, namely those who lived in the northern regions of the country. The Indian elites wanted to “retain English as a window to the world”. Today English is used for “interregional communication” (Metcalf, 2008: 248). English is very important in the world of work “professional and business employment often required educated Indians to leave their home provinces to become members of communities in English as the *lingua franca*. The same mobility that made English a valuable asset also constituted an information grid about conditions in the rest of the subcontinent, and thus laid the groundwork for a national consciousness” (Stein, 1988:271). It is in a way ironic that the language that makes it possible for Indians to communicate with each other and have projection all around the world is the language of the colonizer, that in a way was enabling Indians to have easier access to wealth and prosperity. In a citation by Jyotsna Singh in the book *Colonial Narratives* he quotes Nehru who writes about this duality while writing about the time when Britain conquered India:

England of Shakespeare and Milton, of noble speech and writing and brave deeds, of political revolution and the struggle for freedom, of science and technical progress [the other England was the one] of the savage penal code and brutal behaviour, of entrenched feudalism and reaction... Which of these two Englands came to India? It was inevitable that the wrong England...should come in contact with and encourage the wrong India in the process. (Nehru 1959:196-7) (Singh, 1996: 157).

Although colonization brought India a very mixed package of blights and benefits, more or less 40 years had passed since India had achieved independence in 1947, when Nair directed *Salaam Bombay!*. The way Nair directed this film is in

the style of a documentary, of the kind that she was used to making before. *Pather Panchali* (directed by Satyajit Ray) who, as I have just said in chapter one, was Mira Nair's inspiration to become a film director, was voted in 1956 "Best Human Document" in at the Cannes Festival. Ray's films are often regarded as Indian cinema's finest achievements. However, his films represent a departure from the norm in that country which, as is argued by Maria Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis in their book *Film a Critical Introduction*,

Popular Indian films are typically an eclectic hodgepodge of styles: comic interludes, musical sequences, religion, adventure, fights, socio-political considerations-all get mixed up together in commercial (pan -Indian mainstream) cinema, often characterized by the epithet masala (spicy) (Thoroval, p. 118) (323).

One can clearly see Mira Nair's passion for *Pather Panchali* in her direction of *Salaam Bombay!* because she tried to film in "real" places and "the visual style of *Pather Panchali* also stands in sharp contrast to India's popular cinema. It abandons studio shooting in favour of locations (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 2008:324). It was as if she realised it would be a mistake to interfere with the action occurring before the camera. According to the book *Film: a critical introduction* there is a difference between commercial films which are designed to appeal to a mass audience in order to make profits for the companies that produce, distribute, and exhibit them, and documentary films whose aim is to present contemporary or historical events, not fictional stories. Documentary filmmakers are not generally motivated by profit; instead, they use film as a means of personal expression to address important social issues and to expand the aesthetic vocabulary of film art (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2008:280). For this reason, I think that this film may be considered a documentary realist film because it wasn't produced in Hollywood, it was made with a low budget, it uses non-actors and it has an important social concern. This is an artistic tendency that flowered following the Second World War; it was a reaction that filmmakers had to the devastation of war. Yasujiro Ozu had already written a very similar story in his

*Record of a Tenement Gentleman* (Japan, 1947) about a homeless boy. In the end the boy gathers cigarette butts to sell and Otane (a widow) makes a speech about the selfishness of people in modern society. Not only in Japan but also throughout European cinema, people were adapting to this new situation of post – war poverty. In Italy, for example, they were

searching for new themes and styles to reflect changing realities, they evolved a different language of cinema. They looked different and the experience of watching them was new. They broke open the parallel universe of closed romantic realism and changed cinema's sense of what constitutes time and nature of drama. Responding to the shifting realities around them, they had a profound influence on cinema in Latin America and India, creating the possibility for post-colonial world cinema (Cousins, 2004:187,188).

This social awareness that is appreciated in some of Nair's films had also affected Italian filmmakers at that time, "with a moral conscience" that "addressed or expressed what was happening on those streets" (Cousins, 2004:189). After the Second World War, the Indian cinema industry collapsed namely because it was run by "families and friends and financed by the lower rungs of capitalist entrepreneurship and speculators" (Hayward, 2006: 449). However, this problem was eventually overcome and today cinema is big business in India, perhaps even bigger than cinema in the US. Nonetheless television has been affecting cinema audiences since 1990s that is why "this current cinema has now become the mainstay of television programming...". Among other factors, the popularity of Bollywood films has to do "with their seamless mix of Hindi and Urdu", that is to say, that they are "accessible to half of India's population" (Hayward, 2006:448).

Nowadays many Indian films "are set in the contemporary era and deal with realistic situations", the film industry "has become better organized" and there is "an expanding market overseas"; this has also to do with Diaspora film-makers, among them Mira Nair, who "have helped to 'bring India' to Western audiences"(Hayward, 2006: 454), but also due to the diaspora itself, placing large Indian audiences in western and other extra-territorial countries.

This is not to say that it was easy for her to direct the film in India; she had to negotiate with Indian mafia/brothel owners and madams who wanted to be well-compensated for the use of their locations in the film (Muir, 2006:51). The fact that the majority of the performers were not real actors made the story seem more authentic (although I would challenge anyone to say who are and who are not the professional actors because the entire cast was all so very well prepared).

Throughout the film, the children used were very well treated; Mira learned how to be flexible, to incorporate children's ideas if they came up with something better. In a way they became the family for those kids, they lived in the same house. Krishna even had to go on a diet because he was so well-treated that he started to gain weight. The lives of these kids changed due to participation in this film. Their salaries were paid in three parts: the first upon shooting, the second deposited in an account after production had closed, and the final held in a trust until the child's twenty-first birthday (Muir, 2006: 52, 53-61). However according to an article by Savie Karna, even though she tried her best to assure the future of these kids, for instance the main character Krishna Shafiq. He was at that time 12 and now he is 32, is an auto driver and is very sceptical about the future life of street kids when he says: "Even after winning the national award for the best child actor, I was begging in Mumbai for a living. Now, I am driving an auto to make ends meet. Filmmakers just use us and throw us out. The children in *Slumdog Millionaire* too will be forgotten with time, just like the way I was forgotten. I only wish the media keeps following these kids, because of which [sic] filmmakers will ensure a good life for them." Nair never forgot the experience she had with the direction of this film, so through her mother she created the Salaam Balak Trust. Nair not only thinks about a problem and draws public attention to it but she also tries to find a solution. Nair therefore, with the help of her mother (the organisation's administrator), helps the young with learning centers for children all over India (Muir, 2006: 61).

According to Mira Nair on the DVD audio commentary: she was 29 years old when she made her first feature film, she had done 5 documentaries about India and in the making of these, she had found the inspiration to make a film about the life of street kids in Bombay.



*Salaam Bombay!* (1988) was Mira Nair's first feature film and it deals directly with human misery, child labour, and drugs. Throughout the years directors have tried to capture the texture of reality through their lenses, however this is very difficult because what is realism for some is fantasy to others - because we don't all see things the same way and according to Hallam & Marshment in the book *Realism and Popular Cinema* "...realism is seen as being appropriated for, and being obliged to, represent social reality in the interests of knowledge and social justice" ( Hallam, Marshment, 2000: xiii).

Although Bollywood and Nollywood films are very prolific, the truth is that we in the west are bombarded with Hollywood films and the rest of the world is in many ways forgotten. With this film Nair tried to show the west a different and unfamiliar state of affairs. We have subsequently had several attempt to direct the viewer's attention to films about the changing and shocking nature of how children actually live and behave in different parts of the modern world, such as *kids* (1995) directed by Larry Clark, and *A cidade de Deus* (2002) directed by Fernando Meireles. These last two reflect the two extremes of parental indulgence and abandonment found almost contemporaneously in the world and delivered to audiences with maximum shock effect for our sentimental illusions about childhood. That is to say that, the naïve idea that we have that children are innocent and incapable of doing harm to others has been demystified over the years, as for instance when Alan R. Felthous writes in his article *Aggression Against Cats, Dogs and People*:

(...) Margaret Mead was apparently the first to suggest that if children torture animals, this may be an ominous sign of impulsive character development, with potential for harming the others ( Felthous, 2005: 169).

This is to say that sometimes children have bad within themselves but at other times it is simply necessity that turns them into worse people. Mira has clearly been influenced by Italian Neorealism, in which cineastes did not sentimentalise poverty; they were rather pointing out the obvious, that extremes of poverty (especifically during and after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World war) made people do bad things. This is how two critics describe the movement:

Italian Neorealism was an influential postwar cinema whose social and economic context defined its style in crucial ways. In Italy after world War II, Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, and Luchino Visconti, actors and directors who had trained and worked in the commercial Italian film industry before the war, produced startling and distinctive films that seemed to capture the reality of the physical devastation, the moral degradation, and the human suffering of the war years...Neorealist filmmaking grew from real-life events-yet the films were fictionalized accounts of experiences during the war and of the hardships of postwar Italy (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 2008: 325).

We may relate *Salaam Bombay!* with De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* because although Krishna hasn't stolen a bike he was turned away from home by his mother after having destroyed his brother's bicycle and could only return when he had enough money to buy another. Of course this was possible an excuse of a mother who had not enough money to sustain one more person. "Although Rossellini's *Rome, Open City (Roma, città aperta)*"; 1945) and De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* were scripted, they convincingly relayed the harsh realities of wartime and its aftermath with a directness and immediacy that seemed to be missing from the escapist Italian and Hollywood films of the 1930s" ( Pramaggiore and Wallis, 2008: 325).

When Rajiv Gandhi won the elections in 1984, his image was comparable to that of a Bombay male film idol. By the year *Salaam Bombay!* was released, India was launching a campaign against "American culture and goods" which was supported by the Hindu right and the socialist left. Rajiv by contrast "sought to ally himself with the young modern managers, who, like himself, found the old 'permit raj' constraining." However, this opening up to foreign investment had its consequences (as often happens) for impoverish workers: the worst disaster of all time: the spreading of a toxic gas from an American company Union Carbide, that killed instantly 7,000 and thousands died later or suffered from its side effects with chronic illnesses. Rajiv's defeat and death in 1989 brought to an end the rule for 40 years by the family of Jawaharlal Nehru. At that time, India's urban middle class was prospering and India was starting to make its contribution to the emergence of a global culture( Metcalf & Metcalf, 2008:260-266).

## **2. *Salaam Bombay!* (1988) – the narrative**

The film starts with a medium shot of a circus's camp in a deserted landscape. Slowly the camera begins to focus on Krishna's work in the circus. This background acts here as the opposition to what we will see later in Bombay. The emptiness of nature, as opposed to the crowded and confused city. However, although Bombay is full of people, it is also full of emptiness. In that crowded city, importance is given to the life of a doubly abandoned child (by his family and by the circus), because children are vulnerable and fragile and because the situation of children is the central topic addressed in this film.

Krishna has been kicked out by his mother until he gets the money to pay for the bicycle he has ruined. This may seem a little too harsh but underneath this can be seen the underlying economic difficulties of a family which makes them act in this way; seizing on a pretext to give them one less mouth to feed. It is hard to understand but when primary needs are not met, everything else obviously seems to lose importance, and this includes family loyalty and cohesion.

In this film there are a lot of touching scenes that are the result of Nair's social awareness. One of those scenes is the scene where Krishna goes to a scribe to send a letter to his mother; he pays the scribe but when Krishna has gone away the latter doesn't bother to mail his letter because Krishna doesn't really know the correct address and the scribe sees no necessity in wasting a stamp. According to Nair's commentary on the film, she says that the actor that plays the scribe was too tall and too old to be a street boy so she gave him this small role. It is interesting to notice that this actor (Irfan Khan) is now a famous actor and is the father of the main character in Nair's 2006 film *The Namesake*<sup>3</sup> and was also chosen by Nair to be an actor in her contribution to the film *New York I Love You* (2009), made together with ten other directors.

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3 "The only person I was clear from the beginning was Irfan Khan [Ashoke], who I actually discovered eighteen years ago ' he was in my first film, *Salaam Bombay!*, and I always looked for something that could do justice to his talent, and this was the role." - Nair's words about casting for *The Namesake* in the site <http://www.thecinemasource.com/blog/3018/interviews/mira-nair-interview-for-the-namesake/>

The scene when Krishna saves Chillum from killing himself is very strong; we feel touched by the love for someone and his fear of losing a loved person once again. This scene is another example of the social concern that Mira Nair has, in this case for the poor who are dependent on drugs. This film, that was released 22 years ago, is unfortunately still today very relevant. As stated in the site *The Azad India Foundation*<sup>4</sup>:



**Chillum and Krishna 4**

“According to a UN report, one million heroin addicts are registered in India, and unofficially there are as many as five million. What started off as casual use among a minuscule population of high-income group youth in the metro has permeated to all sections of society. Inhalation of heroin alone has given way to intravenous drug use, that too in combination with other sedatives and painkillers. This has increased the intensity of the effect, hastened the process of addiction and complicated the process of recovery. Cannabis, heroin, and Indian-produced pharmaceutical drugs are the most frequently abused drugs in India. Cannabis products, often called charas, bhang, or ganja, are abused throughout the country because it has attained some amount of religious sanctity because of its association with some Hindu deities. The International Narcotics Control Board in its 2002 report released in Vienna pointed out that in India persons addicted to opiates are shifting their drug of choice from opium to heroin. The pharmaceutical products containing narcotic drugs are also increasingly being abused.”

Although in this film Chillum is a drug addict and we are led to think that he came from a family facing difficulties not unlike Krishna's because when Krishna asks him: “When did you come here” Chillum answers: “It is an ancient story, I forgot I was half your size when I ran away from home”, and Krishna asks: “And then?”

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4 <http://www.azadindia.org/social-issues/Drug-Abuse-in-India.html>

and Chillum answers: "Forget it. Why spoil a good high?" We don't know why he ran away from home but that fact in truth is not important because drug addiction is an aspect that is common to many of the different groups in society and it has to do with different things, such as the place where people live, less/too much money and such different aspects that it would not be wise for me to go too deeply into this issue. However, it is interesting to see that in an image Nair capture the suffering of the addict and the suffering of the family and friends of the addict, here represented by Krishna. In the cemetery scene Chillum, while smoking his drug, says: "This is the grandfather of poisons. Sometimes my heart tells me...I should swallow rat poison and sleep for the last time..." and Krishna asks: "Why not give up?" and Chillum answers: "You won't understand." And then he starts singing; singing as a way to ease the pain and to forget the hardship of his life. Throughout the film, music is often used as a way to soften the hardship of a character's life.

There are three crucial scenes in this film that will change Krishna, the first one is when after Chillum's (Raghubir Yadav) death due to an overdose, he is still grieving for him when he discovers that Chillum has made impracticable his dream of returning home because he was the one who stole all his money to feed his drug habit.

The second scene is when Manju's mother decides to leave the pimp Baba's house because, as Manju is kept in the Chiller Room, she feels that her daughter should no longer be obliged to stay there. While Baba is trying to force her to stay, Krishna picks up Baba's knife and kills him. It is at this moment that he loses what remains of his childhood and the little innocence that he had left; this is the turning-point in the making of a new Krishna.

The third scene is when they are both running from the crime scene, they get into a parade and they are swollen up by the crowd and they become just two more lost souls in an overcrowded Indian conurbation. They are separated and it is here that he loses his mother again. Manju's mother was for him the mother that he didn't have. It's a world full of losses and substitutions, first he loses his friend, then his possibility of returning home (which may have been an illusion from the first) and at last his substitute mother. It seems that when Krishna has almost reached his goals, something always happens that makes it impossible for him to

do so. Running away is the only mode of escape children have (when older they may find drugs or sex, like Chillum and Baba), but usually they aren't able to escape; "...ironically...filmmakers also understand what their protagonists may not, even at the conclusion of their individual stories...that running ultimately leads nowhere" (Muir, 2006: 67).

The way Nair uses colour is exceptional; although it is a colour film, sometimes it seems that the film is all in golden/brown tones that lead the viewer directly to the misery - contrasting for instance with the white of the gloves that Krishna was using when he was being a waiter at a party. The difference between the lighting during the party and after the party is intense. It is expressionist in the way the light is directed, producing shadows on the characters' faces and leading the viewer to think that something will happen.

In the last scene, we see a medium shot of Krishna sitting and then slowly a close-up of Krishna's hands with a top, as if he was hugging the toy as his only comfort. This close-up shows us Krishna's hard transformation from a child into an adult, into someone like Chillum or worse, Baba. The film started with a long shot and finishes with a close-up, moving from the general to the particular, giving the sense that the entire society knows what is going on but no one cares or can do anything effective about it and even when people try to stay together (like Manju's Mother and Krishna), the harsh realities of life conspire to separate them.

With this ending, for me Nair was trying to say that the life of street kids is impossibly hard and that Krishna was only one of many millions. Society enjoys watching other people's stories of hardship in one of the world's biggest megacities, but reneges on its duty to do something about it. This was not the end that was originally in the script but due to budgetary constraints, they had to come up with a different ending. What was in the original script was:

"it's a night shot. He's Krishna separated from her (Manju's mother Rekha). He's walking down the streets of Bombay, and revellers are going home. Under a bridge there's a long line of homeless people sleeping, and he goes down and lies next to them. There's a close up of him, and a hand covers him with a tattered blanket, and then the camera

moves up to show him surrounded by the other sleepers, and then they are enveloped by the city of Bombay (Muir, 2006:56).

This is perhaps a reference to Jean Paul Sartre's famous remark ironising those who, like George W, Bush, are given to extolling freedom in the abstract, that the poor are equally free along with the rich to sleep under the bridges of Paris. From my point of view, this film by Mira Nair, *Salaam Bombay*, was the first that focused on a range of social issues in the same film, that is to say, misery (of body and mind), drugs, loneliness, child exploitation, sexual abuse and migration. The title can be understood in several ways. The word *Salaam* itself means peace, but the word is also used when people are greeting each other. In my opinion, the title itself means hope, although it may seem a little ironic because when one watches the film, we are confronted with a lot of disillusionment and it is a welcome to a city that almost invites one to misery and abjection. When we are watching it for the first time, it is almost impossible not to feel anguish and sympathy for that boy. This film has a linking element with *The Namesake*, that is to say, the lack of the father figure. In *Salaam Bombay!* the father doesn't appear to exist and in *The Namesake* the loss of the father figure leads to life-changing suffering. Probably if Krishna had had a father, his life wouldn't have been so miserable. In *The Namesake*, Gogol's anguish begins precisely with the death of his father.

On the whole, it is interesting, although sad, to notice that the issues focussed on in some of her films are very up to date, Nair cared about what was happening at that time. In this film, we can see her characters clearly influenced by Bollywood films, with the dance scene between Manju and her mother (Rehka) and when the children go to the cinema and enjoy themselves looking up at a film that has nothing to do with the reality of their sordid lives. This influence will be taken up and reflected in many of her films. With this film, she not only gave voice to the cause of the unprotected but she also made possible (by herself or by giving the idea to others) to help people through, for example, learning centers.

In this film she does that using people that were not professional actors, using music to transmit to the viewer some moments of lightness or joy amid the hardship of children's lives and she also works a lot with the intensity of light and

shadows to suggest a kind of expressionistic demi-monde in which the street people are obliged to live. The vivacity of the scenes captures the viewer's attention with a sense of India's multitudinousness and has a kind of grim poetry. This film was in a sense both one of the first steps in establishing the visibility of Indian cinema worldwide and also constituted a new way to make cinema in India.



## Chapter 3:

### ***Monsoon Wedding* ( 2001) – Tradition vs. Modernity**

*“Monsoon wedding was inspired by the idea of making something out of nothing.”*<sup>5</sup>Mira Nair

#### **1. The Weight of Indian Tradition – the caste system**

The Indian caste system by itself constrains the Indian people a great deal because certain people cannot be together if they belong to different castes. According to Mason:

“The caste system is a hierarchy of endogamous groups that individuals enter only by birth. A caste differs from a clan or sib in being endogamous and recognizing various ranks. It differs from a class in its strict enforcement of permanent endogamy within caste groups. (...) Hierarchy based on birth and reincarnation. The caste system recognizes an indefinite number of groups of different ranks each one standing on the shoulders of the castes below it”

This caste system supports the arranged marriage as a way of maintaining itself, by impeding self-selection and contact as the primary means of finding a mate and life-partner. There have been made studies made throughout the years interested in arranged marriages as an opposite system to self-directed modern western marriages. Arranged marriages are prepared by parents, relatives, friends and matchmaking intermediaries, while in western societies the person who wants to

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<sup>5</sup> In *Monsoon Wedding*, the DVD audio commentary.

marry generally looks for a partner him or herself. (Batabyal, 2001:274) We are not able to talk about caste without talking about religion because we cannot be separated. Hinduism is not easily understood by western people because it is very different from Judaic-Christian thought; each person has a *dharma* which varies from person to person and changes through different stages of your life. Since 85 per cent of Indians are Hindu, the caste system dominates Indian life (Farndon, 2008:64). Hinduism is not a static religion; it is “constantly absorbing new deities and philosophies, so that the practice of the religion varies in a way that would be impossible in Christianity” (Farndon, 2008:65).

The caste system has been a concern throughout the years; even “from 1900 to 1948, different conceptions of community were projected, created and negotiated, but, inevitably, they were inflected by the antagonisms within society. Both social reform and political ideologies offered intimations of equality to a society where caste inequality was the central issue of politics” (Menon, 19994:190). The caste system’s interconnected with Hinduism has made it resistant to political and social reform.

The Hindu idea that the family in which one is born is a kind of fate and that there is nothing to be done about it. However reincarnation reconciles people to this, enabling them to go further because they believe that they live that way because they must have done something in a previous life and “those who faithfully live their class *dharma* hope to reborn in a higher class. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, an Indian icon of non-violence and universal human values who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by US congressman Joseph Crowley, has done a lot to end this segregation he says:



**Sri Sri Ravi Shankar 5**

“If everybody in society lives in the present moment; if we are able to accept people as they are, there will be no problem, no

strife. It is every human-being's birthright to have a disease free body and a stress free mind..."<sup>6</sup>

That is to say, this is what is desirable and theoretically should happen. However the fact is that this caste system and Hinduism have a negative effect upon women's positions in society. Hinduism stands for the idea that all people have female and male principles and that the supreme being is conceptualized as one complete sex containing male and female organs, hermaphroditism being the ideal state. There are also other exercises in which men imitate women in order to realize the women in themselves. Homosexuality was not well seen in the old lawbooks. The first formulation of the Hindu moral code held that men who engaged anal sex lose their caste. Nevertheless while western culture tries to resolve sexual contradictions and ambiguities by rational investigation, Hinduism allows opposites to co-exist, having in mind that all is possible and nothing should exclude other ways of being (Nanda, 1999:177-178). In respect of homosexuality however, as I said, caste may be fate but ill-advised behaviour can cause one to lose one's caste.

Although discrimination against women has generally been decreasing throughout the years, women are still very discriminated against in India. Women in India are seen as more of a burden to society, mainly in rural India, where they can still be considered property. The concept of dowry is clearly a token of discrimination against women. Dowry is the transfer of money, goods and services from brides and their families to grooms and their families.

Dowry is an important element in the establishment of marital ties between the brides' natal family and that of her bridegroom. There have been measures to ban the act such as *The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961*.

The act made illegal the giving of dowry which was defined as any property or valuable security given either directly or indirectly at or before or after the marriage as a consideration for the marriage. It further stipulated that any dowry received by any

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.srisri.org/biography>

person than the bride was to be transferred to her and anyone found guilty of giving or taking or abetting the giving or taking of dowry should be punished with imprisonment, or fine or both (Caplan,1984:219).

As only wealthy women can depend on their offspring, this leads many times to female abortion. According to Manisha Gupte, Sunita Bandewar and Hemlata Pisal this is a consequence of the “widespread practice of sex-selective abortion of female fetuses in India”. Modern technology is used for prenatal sex discrimination, this fact led to the 1988 law in Maharashtra that prohibited sex discrimination tests. However women continue to have abortions after pre-natal sex determination ( Gupte, Pisal, 1997:77-79).

Being a women is not easy in India, according to an article by Uma Chakravarti while writing about the status of women, she says that this has led to a concentration of attention on a limited set of questions such as marriage law, property rights, religious practices, normally viewed as indices of status and that now it is time to look into gender relations and to the nature and basis of the subordination of women. The general subordination of women in India has assumed

a particularly severe form in India through the powerful instruments of religious traditions which have shaped social practices. A marked feature of Hindu society is its legal sanction for an extreme expression of social stratification in which women and lower castes have been subjected to humiliating conditions of existence. Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the organizing principles of the brahmanical social order (...)The central factor for the subordination of the upper caste women: the need for effective sexual control over such women to maintain not only patrilineal succession but also caste purity (Chakravarti, 1993:579).

Social differences find a parallel in gender differences. However patriarchal authority is something Nair seems unwilling to challenge openly because her

native culture accepts it so readily. This subordination of women in obedience to their fathers by accepting traditionally arranged marriages will be in a way be counterbalanced in her segment of the film 8, where she focuses more on gender equality. However, although there has been progress toward gender equality in many parts of the world, great disparities still persist, such as:

(...) women and girls living under extreme versions of Islamic law introduced by the Taliban. They were denied education, barred from the workplace, and unable to venture out in public without a male companion and the full head-to-toe covering of the burqa. The end of colonial rule (...) was seen as a major opportunity to promote prosperity and democracy (...) In India, for example, although women's right are also limited in many important ways, about 800,000 women serve in local government, with one third of all local council seats reserved for them (Inglehart & Norris, 2003: 3).

## **2. *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) – the narrative**

Nair's film *Monsoon Wedding* might at first glance seem a love story, however we quickly notice that it is much more than that. Once more, it is a film that deals with Nair's concerns about society. Following *Salaam Bombay*, here Nair keeps the plot in India but brings Indians from all around the world together for a wedding; only later on in *The Namesake* does she focus on the difficulties inherent to immigrant peoples.

The plot centres on an arranged married in New Dehli, which unites two families but which in essence brings together the dispersed family of the bride. In this film, as she was later to do in *The Namesake*, Nair doesn't criticize arranged marriages, that is to say, Nair in both films gives a positive view of them. In the *Namesake* Ashima and Ashoke fall in love with each other and in *Monsoon Wedding* Aditi and Hemant decide to marry even after Aditi admits to having been in love with another man. In a way Nair is justifying this tradition of arranged

marriages that exists in India , and in many places around the world, suggesting that sometimes it can turn out a good thing. Aditi has only reluctantly agreed to marry after an unhappy and futureless relationship with a married man. Nair has managed to direct several ancillary stories around an arranged marriage, building to an interesting series of climaxes. For instance we have Dubey's character, who evolves in dramatic and comic ways as his relationship with and feelings for Alice become more important to him. Nair has also succeeded in including themes that are often characteristic of her films, that is to say, the prevalence of discrimination in respect of economic status, gender, class and nationality.

In my opinion Nair, amongst other important social issues, focuses on the position of women as she had already done in 1996 with the film *Kama Sutra: A tale of love*. If here both Tara and Maya lose, Tara the queen who was not happy in an arranged married and Maya, who with "Nair's decision to end the film with Maya renouncing desire, operates contrary to the 'kamasutric' philosophy that she claims she has successfully espoused. According to one critic, if Nair wanted to create a 'kamasutric' text, she should have granted Maya agency over her sexual desires, not forced her to walk away abjectly" (Rajan, 2002: 64). In *Monsoon Wedding*, Aditi wins because the viewer sees her happy at the end.

In *Monsoon Wedding* she once again talks about children, but in this case she takes up her concern with child abuse. The BBC recorded that,<sup>7</sup> "Two out of every three children in India are physically abused, according to a landmark government study." As this film was made in 2007, unfortunately we can see that what Nair raised at that time continues to exist.

Ria was abused while she was a child by a man to whom they were in debt (Tej). Despite this fact, and after wrestling with his personal indebtedness to Tej, a family member, Lalit's ( Aditi's father) sense of love and honour is stronger and he expels him from the wedding ceremony. We only become aware of this fact when Aliya a younger girl while talking about kissing says she knows everything about kissing. She says that it is "gross," and that "you open your mouth and he sticks his tongue in. Yeah, don't you know? That's how older people kiss". This scene

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<sup>7</sup> In an article by Geeta Pandey

alters Ria's behavior because since she was abused by Tej when she was a child, she fears that it happens the same to Aliya. When Tej offers to drive Alyia home because she was feeling "tired and cranky" Ria makes that unfeasible. Once more according to the study (when quoting Dr Loveleen Kacker) "She said a substantial number of the abusers were "persons in trust and care-givers" who included parents, relatives and school teachers." It is also important to notice that:

70% had not reported the abuse to anyone. Besides surveying physical and sexual abuse, the study also collected statistics on emotional abuse and neglect of girls. The study called for efforts to make society aware of the rights of children and officials say the data will help them formulate better policies to protect children. The report has been welcomed by child rights activists who say such a study was sorely needed in India. Roland Angerer, country director of Plan International, told BBC News it was "very important that the government has finally taken up the issue". "It doesn't matter what statistics say. Whether the percentage of abused children is 75 or whether it is 58 is unimportant. Each child that is abused is one too many," he said. "It's important that parents and adults must learn that children are not property, that they have rights too." In India, parents are often reluctant to admit child abuse and sexual abuse of children involving family members is almost always hushed up"(Pandey, 2007).

Nair has tried to give voice to the many problems existing in her country, like this one of child abuse. If on the one hand she says that tradition may not be bad, on the other hand, she also says that there are many things that must change. According to Nair's DVD audio's commentary on the film, she says that she made this film so that she could feel: "close to home" because she is from a Punjabi family in New Dehli. Dehli is growing even faster than Mumbai because it is "physically closer to the heart of one of the biggest and fastest growing markets". Dehli is seeing investment from foreign merchandisers: "both Wall-Mart and Tesco are starting their Indian operations in Dehli." The city itself is more spacious than Mumbai (Farndon, 2008:156). It is interesting to notice that while viewing *Salaam*

*Bombay*, we can see precisely this because whereas in *Salaam Bombay* we see an overcrowded India. In *Monsoon Wedding* we have the notion of suburban space because when the film starts we see a house with a big garden and lots of space, whereas in *Salaam Bombay!* the film starts with a rural wasteland, but when Krishna arrives in Bombay we are confronted immediately with overcrowding and lack of space in the traffic jams, alleyways and in the slums. Delhi's mayor since 1998, Sheila Dikshit, has been making an effort to improve the quality of life of people living there. Sheila "tried to change Delhi's water-supply system... and scored some notable successes." She also tried to improve the traffic with the creation of Delhi's new Metro and "even the poor will be able to hop on the Metro and cross the city in a brief journey" (Farndon, 2008:157). The way Nair directs the camera to the background features of Indian life, with many street scenes indulged for their local colour, we are able to see all these differences.

The first scene in the film immediately settles the viewer into the main plot of the film: a wedding ceremony. The film starts with a symbol that continues to appear throughout the film: flowers, in this case, petals falling as if they were falling from the sky. "Openings are important because they are usually intended to grab and hold the attention of the receivers of the text. People may walk out of a movie or play that begins badly or boringly; many of us wouldn't bother finishing a novel that does not interest us from the start..." (Lacey, 2000:8). In this scene we also see the opposition between modernity vs. tradition when we see people speaking in Hindi and when Aditi's father (Lalit) begins to speak with a younger man, he begins to speak in English, just as Aditi's mother speaks with her son in English.

The proportion of English dialogue in *Monsoon Wedding* (...) was 60 percent by the director Mira Nair's own reckoning (Lahr, 2002:109). A large proportion of the younger Hindi film actors and actresses as well as directors seem rather more comfortable speaking English and living their lives in it than in Hindi or any other Indian language; indeed, they give the impression that they would speak Hindi only when paid handsomely to do so. In interviews and chat shows with them on Hindi TV channels, the interviewer may typically begin by asking a short and simple question in Hindi or a somewhat longer and less



simple question in Hinglish, but the actor, after beginning with a token phrase or halting half sentence in Hindi, would quickly switch almost completely to English, such a procedure perhaps demonstrating that although Hindi may have all the questions, it is English apparently that has all the answers ( Krishnaswamy & Hawley, 2008: 205).

It is interesting to notice that if on the one hand Indians are obsessive about maintaining the links with India, most notably through arranged marriages, we also notice that many people feel much more comfortable while they are speaking in English, This is a situation that English colonialism has left behind. It is unquestionable that colonialism has produced many ways of behaving and thinking that are part of a unsolicited western inheritance, in this case from Britain. That is to say that colonialism many times destroys a country's richness in this case its local languages. If on the one hand India has been gaining global power, and English has helped a lot with that, on the other hand India has also seen a part of its "culture" leech away.

The fact that Lalit is using a mobile phone is also a symbol of the family's modernity. According to a BBC interview by Zubair Ahmed on the importance of the mobile phone to many people, one student answers: "In some ways it's a status symbol. The better phone you have the richer you are." A person says he can't imagine life without a mobile phone. "It keeps ringing. It makes me feel somebody loves me, somebody cares for me in this world. And you can stay connected. I feel it's prestigious to have a cell phone." Moreover, according to a United Nation report,<sup>8</sup> more people have access to a mobile phone than to a toilet "India has some 545 million cell phones, enough to serve about 45 per cent of the population, but only about 366 million people or 31 per cent of the population had access to improved sanitation in 2008." It is therefore, in a way, a false or easy symbol of modernity that unfortunately occludes the reality of often improper living condition.

While Aditi is speaking with her cousin Ria, telling her the reasons why she had decided to marry, they are inside a car and that very car functions as a sign

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=34369&Cr=mdg&Cr1>

that she has decided to move on, that she was no longer stuck on the married man who will not leave his wife (although we will see later that it was not quite as simple as that). When Aditi's father goes to the garden without having finished shaving his beard, this is a symbol of what he is going to say to Dubey (the wedding organizer): "Do you want me to lose face?." Nair's way of speaking about the importance given to tradition was to show Aditi's father several times reckoning if he will have money enough to pay for the wedding ceremony. Furthermore, we also see Aditi's mother smoking anxiously in the bathroom, the bathroom as a symbol of a private place. Responsibility is almost entirely placed on the male; indeed the family women are seen on a shopping trip where they seem unaware of the family's debts. While we are following Aditi in a happy state, we shift to a long shot of Dubey and then slowly the camera focuses on Alice's face, holding a closer shot while we are hearing music almost as it was a cry. In this way, it becomes clear that their lives will be connected in some way. Moreover we have the "classic" film scene when Alice stumbles into Dubey and breaks some glasses while he completely ignores her. Alice is an example of the tradition that exists in India in which servants are not treated as equals. According to a blog written by M.J.Akbar, an Indian journalist and writer:

"The servant is both the provider as well as the potential assailant, particularly if male, for he belongs to a world that is distant both geographically and psychologically. The young man cleans utensils only because he is a prisoner of necessity. The rewards are pitiful; the treatment pitiable. The threat of servant violence is the regular diet of the media; but cruelty towards servants is largely ignored, perhaps because journalists are part of the middle class and complicit. Developed societies in the West created robotic machines, like the dishwasher, to fill the gap, even as they lifted the poor into an expanding middle class, loosely defined as a group with enough for food, clothing, shelter and basic education. The Indian attitude to washing machines is unique: we hire servants to use them. Those who cannot afford washing machines can still afford servants to wash clothes the older way. Some overlap is understandable in the transition phase, but the incremental rise in upward

mobility is a flickering fact, not a sustained reality. The tension of denial is evident on the visage of those servants who haven't become reconciled to their dull fate. It's true that the majority of servants have no dispute with their economic destiny, since this maximum-effort, minimal-reward employment prevents starvation. But that, surely, is not a pleasant reality" (Akbar, 2010).

The blending of music and visuals is frequently used in Nair's films to send a message. In the middle of the film when a woman is singing before the wedding ceremony, she sings : "My father, I leave you the palace of your love" and slowly the camera focuses on Aditi's father's facial expression, which shows acute sadness, then we see Aditi's face as she is forlornly closing her eyes and the women continues singing: "...to become a stranger to you forever". In fact the strategies Nair is using to show this opposition between tradition and modernity (although in one way not very original because they are standardized action/reaction shots). However they do very well accomplish their aims of expressing the importance of the father/daughter relationship in a social system valorizing the contractual marriage between families. The scene were Dubey eats a flower similar to the one that Alice had, and later on, when the camera focuses on Alice and she is nervously destroying flowers, once more is a paralleling strategy used by Nair where we are confronted from the similarity between a weird and clumsy man and a wise one only with the help of the music and the camera moving in slowly very close. In many respects, Dubey is the most interesting character in the film (he makes the transition from comic buffoon to romantic hero - unlike his one-dimensional, better-looking male colleagues), and his blossoming romance with Alice is the most touching thing about the film. Alice's fine-featured and petite beauty is also something the camera captures very well. Nair's subversion of their caste inferiority by promoting them to prominence is something taken up in the final egalitarian wedding dance sequence. It is also interesting to notice Dubey's changing facial expression. Before he felt interested in Alice, he was usually smiling and looking. After being rejected by Alice because she thought he was responsible for her being accused of stealing her mistress's jewellery, he loses his smile and seems to become an anguished and despairing character.

The symbol of the flower as life then is a complex one; with its destruction, the grief and desolation it can contain is represented. The flower is connected with bad and good because we also watch Tej (Ria's abuser) put a flower in the child's hair. Music is also in evidence in Nair's film when Varan decides not to dance with Aditi's cousin (Ayesha) because he was upset about his father's constant deriding of him. He gives in, however, in the film's most inclusive Bollywoodian sequence. When Lalit was against the fact that his younger son wanted to be a cook, he is here once again representing traditional macho values.

When Ayesha asks Rahul (the Australian cousin) to dance with her and he says no, she answers: "bloody foreigner" - in a moment of rage he was no longer Indian. Then, after observing her dancing and meanwhile other people started to join the dance and then when a man starts to dance with her, Rahul starts feeling jealous and leaps in dancing with her even without knowing how to (the result is a hybrid dance from Rahul and Ayesha). This dance scene is very powerful because it is as if we are led into the dance only through music and attitudes and few words are used so that when they are said, the viewer can focus on them when Aditi's father said to Tej: "I love you brother". The music is showing that everyone was happy but when the music in a way is interrupted by words, this cut in the scene is to draw the viewers' attention to its importance and also to the fact that Tej doesn't answer, as if he knows he cannot reply because he is not worthy of Lalit's words.

The use of the flower continues when, while they are all dancing, we see Dubey giving Alice a heart made of flowers, this time flowers as a symbol of a good thing. Another important symbol is the title itself because "... monsoon rains sweep across India each summer. Indian agriculture is almost wholly dependent on these rain..." (Metcalf, 2008 xviii) because with the 1965 drought India had a decline of 19 per cent in food grain forcing India to ask assistance from the United States (Metcalf, 2008:249). I therefore conclude that the film ending with Aditi's wedding ceremony, full of rain, functions here as a symbol of replenishment, happiness, reconciliation for all except Tej, and hope for the future.

In opposition to *Salaam Bombay!*, in *Monsoon Wedding* Nair focuses more on educated and wealthy people, although sometimes ones facing harrowing difficulties (like Aditi's father, who was always concerned about the expense, to

see if he could afford it). However, in this film as she had done before in *Salaam Bombay!*, she also used non-actors like Aditi's cousin who was in real life from Australia, was a model and Nair used that fact because in the script Aditi's cousin was from Toronto, and Varan (Aditi's brother) was in real life Nair's nephew <sup>9</sup>and also a non-professional actor.

Globalization is also clear in the film, we see Aditi's cousin from Australia the bride groom from the United States, other relatives from Dubai, in short the sense of a global family. In the book *Multiculturalism in a Global Society* it is written: "...societies are now more interconnected and interdependent than ever before...We live in a world that is at once local and global- and increasingly the distinction between the two is difficult to make..." (Kivisto, 2002:1). *Monsoon Wedding* very much bears out this point.

In the film's last scene, we see Dubey once more eating a flower when he is with Alice and in a way they are celebrating their love, apart from Aditi's and Hemant's wedding ceremony. On one side, we see quietness and silence and on the other side, we see music and confusion. According to Nair's words in the DVD audio's commentary, as the "Punjabi are very materialistic" this scene shows the opposite to "silks and wealth". Alice and Dubey are then called to join the party - this means at least a temporary end to the barrier between boss and servant. It also strikes one as the film's most westernising touch.

During the wedding ceremony, Ria starts running into the rain, rain as a symbol of cleansing all her grief and sorrow. Then within the wedding ceremony the camera focuses on the face of a man and then immediately to Ria's face as if their future will be connected. Not for Nair the solace of sisterhood or maiden auntdom. Hers is a very heterosexual vision of domestic happiness, even for the feminist and America-bound Ria.

Once again there is music and few words when, while dancing with Rahul, Aditi's cousin says to him: "we finally made an Indian out of you." Making an Indian out of someone in Nair's work can be understood as attempting to arrest the drift towards an undifferentiated international culture, a trend she herself must have felt

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<sup>9</sup> According to Nair's audio commentary on the DVD.

often and intensely. In short, music and dance continue to help Nair to give meaning to her work, and she in *Monsoon Wedding* focuses more on wealthy and educated people in India, so that the viewer could have another idea of this newer and prosperous and progressive India, no doubt very like the family in which she herself was raised. In terms of the use of lightning if we compare it with *Salaam Bombay!* it seems that throughout *Monsoon Wedding* we have more variation in the intensity of lightning. In *Salaam Bombay!* when the film begins we see the clouded sky and this diffused lightning is as a warning of what will happen, and in *Monsoon Wedding* a lot of colour in the clothes and a bright lightning that in my opinion symbolizes hope in the future couple and hope for the happiness of cohesive families like Lalit's. The film ends with the camera focusing on each couple one at one time suggesting that they will all stay together. This type of ending reminds me some Brazilian soap opera endings, with the wedding ceremonies and the camera focusing on the couples. It is not unrelated to the tradition of American commercial films made around this time, with their Runaway Brides, Best Friend's Weddings and Wedding Planners and Crashers. Old-style weddings and marriage rituals have both made a filmic comeback in the new Millennium, although it can be dated back to the unexpected success of Britain's *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1993).

## **Chapter 4:**

### ***The Namesake* (2006)**

#### **1. Identity and cultural difference – the Indian diaspora.**

The film *The Namesake* (released in 2006) is based on the novel by Jhumpa Lahiri and it focuses on an issue that might at first glance appear to be a familiar subject but one which continues to concern human beings: who am I? Where do I belong? Why do people have different habits? On questions of cultural differences, is there a right and a wrong way to be? Jhumpa Lahiri wrote her book about her own experiences with her own name but chose to write it as a man. This is an interesting aspect of her fiction, that she felt it appropriate to give voice to her own feelings as an Indian-American man. The wife Ashima's interests were always relegated to the background; she seems to live a peripheral existence in America.

There have been over the years studies made about this feeling of returning to a homeland and the Diaspora. According to Falzon the Diaspora is "that segment of people living outside the homeland" but its original meaning was "the dispersion of Jews from a homeland, Israel" and also, according to this article, Ashima has all the characteristic features of a child of the Diaspora because:

"1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original "center" to two or more "peripheral," or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally

or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.”

(Falzon, 2003:663).

However the term Diaspora suggests a condition of exile, it “fails to capture the continuing connection to the homeland that Indians are wont to maintain, no matter where they live ( Padma, 2000: 15). Ashima has all these characteristics of the diaspora, nonetheless she and Ashoke also have the Indian idea of trying to arrange Gogol’s future marriage. It is this idea of diaspora and caste system that leads people (even out of the country for more than one generation) to try to maintain links with people from their homeland, such as the “Gujaratis from Kenya that sent their children back to India to be educated or married even after three or four generations in Africa” (Padma, 2000: 15).

In this film we see once more Nair’s concern for issues that even today are current. As we are facing a global crisis, more and more people are forced to go to other countries in order to find a better quality of life and sometimes it is not only to improve their quality of life but is rather a question of brute survival. However she gave voice to people that already had “everything” because they were well educated, had a caring family and had no obvious money problems. I’m not saying that wealth people haven’t got problems, only that they are not clearly economic migrants in the classic sense. However, this is not to minimise those problems that Nair does present; questions of identity and the loss of loved ones (what Gogol goes through) are not the exclusive preserve of Indians of the diaspora, although it sometimes seems in this film that they are.

The film *The Namesake* begins with Ashoke going to a train full of people in India. At the beginning of the film, we don’t know his name, only some scenes later do we discover it. In the train a man asks him which book he was reading and he answered that he was reading Gogol’s book *The Overcoat*. This book had been given to him by his father. The train is in my opinion is a symbol of the celerity of life because Nair begins the film the same way that she will end it, with a train



journey. As is generally known, the train is also a symbol of India, because its railway system is one of the largest and busiest in the world.

It is interesting to notice that Nair's film have in a way closely followed India's recent history and evolution. She started with *Salaam Bombay!* which had only to do with India itself and here in *The Namesake* she focuses on the processes of adaptation to a foreign country by the first generation of immigrants and what happens to the second generation in a different country and what we lose and what we gain with this process. According to William J. Carrington and Enrica Detragiache in a study about the brain drain "Both India and Korea have seen more than 300,000 people migrate to the United States. It is striking that more than 75 percent of Indian immigrants have a tertiary education, compared with only 53 percent of Korean immigrants." While writing about immigration Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbant wrote:

"Never before has the United States received immigrants from so many countries, from such different social and economic backgrounds, and for so many reasons (...) Increasingly implausible, for example, is the view of a uniform assimilation process that different groups undergo in the course of several generations as a precondition for their social and economic advancement. Today we meet first-generation millionaires who speak broken English, foreign-born mayors of large cities, and top-flight immigrant engineers and scientists in the nation's research centers" (Portes, Rumbant, 2006: 13).

Immigration to the United States has not only an impact on the host country but also on the home country according to a conference about the fiscal impact of the brain drain: Immigration to the United States in 2001 <sup>10</sup>:

Of the Indians who came since 1990 and were still in the U.S. at the end of the decade, an estimated 78 percent had a bachelor's degree or better—21 percentage points greater than the cohort who came during the 1980s and were still in the U.S. at the end of that decade. Human capital outflows of this magnitude must affect developing countries,

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<sup>10</sup> *The Fiscal Impact of the Brain Drain: Indian Emigration to the U.S.*  
<http://www.wcfia.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/DesaiEtAl2001b.pdf>

including India, in myriad ways—many beneficial. A prosperous Diaspora can be a source and facilitator of trade, investment and ideas; a rich vein of remittances; and a potential stock of high human capital returnee emigrants. However, losing a substantial fraction of its “best and brightest” is likely to have substantial negative effects on a country as well. The loss of skilled workers will harm cooperating factors—complementary skilled workers, less-skilled workers, entrepreneurs, and capital providers. The outflow of talent will also make the country less attractive as a destination for foreign direct investment and potentially stunt the development the needed critical mass for successful high technology clusters. Critically, it may have deeply inimical consequences on a country’s institutions, for instance its universities, affecting its long term development.

Before starting to write about the film, I think it is important to see how some of the major social changes have been registered in recent years, notably the growth of India’s population at home and around the world.

This increase in people migrating to the United States in search of a better life was felt and registered by Nair in her films, notably *Mississippi Masala*. During British colonization people migrated mainly to Britain, East Africa, Canada and the Carribean . “More often the recent migration has been by more South Asians from the professional classes, people whose Indian post-secondary education and training makes them attractive to western economies” (Desai, 2004 :11).

This transcontinental mobility brought a lot of good things to people’s lives but also many problems.

In an increasingly globalised and interdependent world, physical borders between countries are weakened and contact between peoples is intensified. The resulting meeting and mixing of cultures brings into question an understanding of individual and collective identities as based on singular, homogenizing notions of nation, culture, language, faith, and calls for the development of plural and shared understandings of self and other...the geographical spaces in which we live today are increasingly multilingual and multicultural, perceived difference, or foreignness, is often

met with prejudice, defensiveness and cultural protectionism, resulting in a hardening of social boundaries and attitudes (Moreira, 2008:109).

Not only was there an increase in immigration from India, there was also an increased exchange of cultural and consumer products. Notably amongst these was Coca Cola “that was excluded from the Indian Market in the late 1970s. It returned in 1995...” (Metcalf, 2008: 271).

## **2. *The Namesake* : the narrative**

Once more we see in this Nair film her developed social concern. This film is very pertinent because she was touched by people’s anguish and identity crises when they are leaving their native country. We have once more the actor Irfan Khan (who performed the scribe in the film *Salaam Bombay!*) which in *The Namesake* is Gogol’s father. It is also interesting to see that the main actor Kal Penn is from the second generation of Indians in America but despite that they have nothing in common as he says in an interview to Rebecca Murray <sup>11</sup>

“I think there are similarities and there are a lot of differences. The biggest assumption that people seem to come up with is that I enjoyed playing the role because we're both Indian Americans, which could not be farther from the truth. I think that's actually the most boring reason to be attracted to a role, is because of ethnicity. On the contrary, when I read the book, it reminded me of *Catcher in the Rye*, which is weird because the two stories are completely different.

I loved Holden Caulfield. I'm not a rich kid from New England who went to boarding school, and yet for some reason I was drawn to that character when I was 14 and read the book. And it was a similar experience. You know, we both, in this case, do have a similar background in terms of being first generation Americans of Indian descent, whatever. But there was

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<sup>11</sup> <http://movies.about.com/od/thenamesake/a/namesake022707.htm>

something intangible about the character that attracted me to the story. And we're totally different."

Kal Penn is an American who seems to be playing up his own recessive indianess here in this role. Nair <sup>12</sup>chose Kal Penn due to her son's insistence that he be auditioned and, as she says about him, "he blew me away", for her he was the only one who could play the role of Gogol, not only through adolescence as also as a grown-up. In this way, the audience will be better convinced by the process of aging of the character.

The film concerns "among other things, the Indian experience outside of India" (Muir, 2008: 232). One aspect of the dilemma of multiculturalism is seen with the use of language in the film: it is rendered in different languages. According to the book *Families in Multicultural Perspective*:

"We tend to see the world only through our own eyes. We impose our own values on others, judging their behaviors and beliefs as strange or inferior instead of different and valuable" (Ingoldsby, Smith, 1999:Vii-Viii).

In the film we have not only the different languages but also the importance given to the English language and a simple curiosity about what comes from abroad. Before Ashima had met Ashoke, she tried on his shoes which were made in USA. It is interesting to see that this scene suggests that in a metaphorical way Ashima could only feel what it would be like to be in America by standing in the shoes of an American. When Ashima meets Ashoke, she recites a poem in English: this was seen as an important faculty in a bride bound for the English-speaking world. This idea comes from the past as Gauri Viswaaathan says in his article: "English literary education as a cultural ideal in British India" (431).

Throughout the film we see a lot of scenes that suggest Nair's sensitivity to the processes of adaptation, such as the scene where Ashima feels cold in America.

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<sup>12</sup> According to an interview made by Michael Dance on 28 January 2008 in the site <http://www.thecinemasource.com/blog/3018/interviews/mira-nair-interview-for-the-namesake/#>

Here the cold is a symbol not only of the weather but also of lost emotional warmth and support, of missing her family.

According to a conversation<sup>13</sup> between Nair and Lahiri, Lahiri said that Nair “showed people who are strangers and can develop an affection.” she also said that “the images of the bridges are such a beautiful metaphor of a division between two places”. Nair through her lenses transmits not only the division but also the stages of acculturation. On his first day at school Gogol brings a message from the school saying: “Due to your son’s preference, he will be known as Gogol in the school.” Once more, this reflects the so-called freedom that exists in America, where every human being, even small children, have the right to self-determination. Of course, this freedom sometimes can bring other unwanted consequences as we will see later on. Gogol was the identity-marker with which he most identified. Ashima says: “In this country, the children decide, he wants to keep Gogol and not Nikhil as his good name.” Ashoke says: “Fine as long as our kid is happy.” Here Ashoke is showing both his tolerance and his acculturation.

It is not easy to be born in another country and yet live with parents’ traditions when they are going on about Bollywood films. Jigna says that *American Desi* portrays the idea that Bollywood films unify all south Asians, including minorities. “College is a crucial time for Indian development especially among migrant and racial minority communities. It is also a time in which the ways the youth produce and consume culture shift and change” (63) In the film *The Namesake* while Gogol was in his youth he goes through all the difficult phases of turning into an adult. He is being teased because of his name; the teacher is talking about Gogol (the writer) and says: “Gogol was reputed to be a hypochondriac, he was deeply paranoid, frustrated, and friendless, he never married and he fathered no children.” The name that he had chosen when he was a child now starts giving him problems. When he gets home he asks his father: “Did you guys know about him when you named me? That he was paranoid, suicidal, friendless, depressed?” The father says: “You forgot to mention that he was also a genius.” The mother says: “...don’t call us guys.” Feeling upset she

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IK2OuTOINhg>

goes on telling her children: "Sometimes when I listen to you both, I feel I have given birth to strangers." Gogol and his sister Sonia live the life of a typical American teenager and this is upsetting to their mother.

When he is with his friends, the question of his name arises. He tells to his friends: "So I am two inches away from her. Her luscious lips part. Just as I'm about to kiss her, she looks at me and says: What's your name?" and the friend says: "Gogol Ganguli" Gogol says: "End of seduction. You know of all the freaking Russian writers in the Universe, Why did they have to choose the weirdest?" Gogol therefore goes through the same problems that other teenagers face (over and above the name issue).

Once more we are able to see in Nair's film her concern with human suffering and difficulty when people immigrate to another country and how the second generation feels, "there are 175 million people living in countries in which they were not born, a level that has doubled in the past 25 years" (Berry, Phinney, Sam, Vedder, 2006: 1, 2). However, not all countries act in the same way. "There are vast national differences in policies, with some countries seeking homogenization, and others seeking cultural pluralism" (1, 2). In the film Gogol and Sonia feel really American, and Gogol becomes only concerned with Indian traditions when his father dies. In the book *Immigrant Youth in Cultural Transition* Berry et al. when talking about immigration and diversity write that:

"much of the interest in this area has come about because the descendents of immigrants do not inevitably become absorbed or assimilate...some do become indistinguishable from the majority in the larger society; some remain culturally vital while achieving full and equitable participation, creating a society made up of many and diverse cultural communities; others also remain culturally vital but stay largely outside the life of the larger society; still others are alienated from their cultures, becoming enmeshed in different social situations that are problematic for themselves and the larger society" (Berry et al., 2006: 4).

When I use the word "culture" I'm referring to it in a broader sense because, as is said in *The Limits of Multiculturalism*, "One could still never know two cultures

within one subjectivity...” (Michaelson,1999:15). We should not easily label people just because they were born in a certain country; we have to see the person as unique, not classify people according to the place where they were born, their religion or the colour of the skin.

When the family travels to India, we are able to observe the gap between Gogol's point of view and his parents. While Sonia and his mother are being carried about in a rickshaw, Ashima asks Gogol: “Why don't you get in, my American sahib? Sonia can sit on my lap.” To his mother's question, Gogol answers: “No, because being pulled by another human being is feudal, and I don't want to be part of something like that...” Gogol was born into another culture and at this point of the film he doesn't identify with some of his parents' traditions.

In India, Sonia and Gogol dress up like Americans; it is how India makes them feel. Nair uses different clothes to emphasize cultural differences, because even when Sonia is dressed like an Indian woman she shows her discomfort through non-verbal communication. They were going to see the Taj Mahal by train and Gogol's father remembers the train accident. When they got there they were astonished by the magnificence of the Taj Mahal. It is while seeing the Taj Mahal that Gogol decides what he wants to be in the future “I think I'm gonna major in architecture.” Although he feels American, it is in India that he decided what he wants to become in his future life.

When they arrive back in America, the word “gangrene” is written on their mail box (presumably a reference to American perceptions of an Indian's pallour) Although they were born in America and they feel American, they are not considered American by some people. This is the prejudice that a lot of immigrants continue to experience. However this prejudice, or racism as some might call it, is unfortunately a tendency that occurs not only in other countries but also within one's own country. According to Dipesh Chakrabarty, “What Indians do to one another is variously described as ‘communalism’, ‘regionalism’ and ‘casteism’, but never ‘racism’. He also says: “A relative of mine wanting to sell a plot of land near Calcutta was recently told by the local Communist leaders that he could indeed sell his land but not to Muslims” (Bennet,1998 : 95).

Nevertheless in my opinion one of the issues on which Nair wants to focus is the prejudice that continues to exist in the minds of the people of the host countries towards immigrants and the prejudice faced by the second generation that, despite being American citizens, are not seen as such.

The turning point in the film is clearly Ashoke's death. Gogol till then had his own life and was even sometimes a little selfish and spoiled in respect of his parents. Now he gets the shock of his life. When Ashoke is in Cleveland, he doesn't feel well, he calls Ashima and then he dies of a heart attack. From this scene on, Gogol questions his cultural identity. His father and the mother were the twin supports of his life and with Ashoke's death Gogol's world collapses. Ashima tries to speak to Gogol but only manages to do so much later on. Gogol goes to the morgue to identify his father. During the funeral, cultural differences are clearly seen; they're all dressed in white and his American girlfriend Maxine enters dressed in black. Gogol has shaved his head and reacts in a cold way to Maxine's presence and then he finishes the relationship. Indeed, the way people feel when someone dies or about death itself is an issue that has been debated throughout the years by thinkers. Fernando Pessoa through his heteronymous Alberto Caeiro wrote on 7 November 1915

Quando vier a Primavera,  
Se eu já estiver morto,  
As flores florirão da mesma maneira  
E as árvores não serão menos verdes que na Primavera passada.  
A realidade não precisa de mim.  
Sinto uma alegria enorme  
Ao pensar que a minha morte não tem importância nenhuma.  
Se soubesse que amanhã morria  
E a Primavera era depois de amanhã,  
Morreria contente, porque ela era depois de amanhã.  
Se esse é o seu tempo, quando havia ela de vir senão no seu tempo?  
Gosto que tudo seja real e que tudo esteja certo;  
E gosto porque assim seria, mesmo que eu não gostasse.  
Por isso, se morrer agora, morro contente,  
Porque tudo é real e tudo está certo.  
Podem rezar latim sobre o meu caixão, se quiserem.



Se quiserem, podem dançar e cantar à roda dele.  
Não tenho preferências para quando já não puder ter preferências.  
O que for, quando for, é que será o que é.  
( Caeiro cited by Cunha 1994).

Nair chooses death as the turning point in Gogol's attitude towards family and life, as Alberto Caeiro had done in this poem, where he expressed the insignificance of each individual and his discovery of life even in the more obvious and simple things "*Se eu já estiver morto, As flores florirão da mesma maneira.*" However Caeiro sees death as a natural thing, while Nair/Gogol sees death as a natural part of life but that brings a radical act of severance .

In India at the funeral ceremony when he is asked about his name, he answers "Gogol". He is Gogol again; he is no longer the Nick he claimed to be when he went to college. Ashima says: "Make up with Maxine" because she sees he is suffering but he doesn't do that. Nair chose the typical prototype of an American emancipated and well educated woman for when Gogol is trying to find his own self and feels the need to reject all things American.



**Maxine and Gogol 6**

He tries to follow Indian traditions and he gets married to the girl (Moushumi) that he has been presented with many years ago and that now is very beautiful; she has studied in France and doesn't follow many of the Indian traditions. They get on well together at first but then then he discovers that she has betrayed him with a Frenchman. Moushumi says: "Maybe it's not enough that we're both Bengali." And Gogol says: "That's not why I love you." The truth here is that it is not only Moushumi that does not love Gogol, but he does not have the courage to recognize it. Moushumi soberly accepts the contingency of relationships because she is the more westernized. Gogol for the moment is pretending that he is not.

When he is at his mother's house he discovers the book: *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, and he remembers his father words "We've all come out of Gogol's *Overcoat*. One day you will understand" Ashima blames herself because Gogol's relationships haven't worked out, but Gogol says: "we're different people, we wanted different things. I know this is gonna sound crazy, but for the first time in my life, I actually feel free." He shows the book to his mother with the inscription: "The man who gave you his name from the man who gave you your name "

In the last scenes of the film, we see flashbacks of Gogol with his father when he was a child. They were near the sea and they had left the camera in the car and Ashoke says: "All this and no picture...we just have to remember it, then. Remember that you and I made the journey..." In my opinion these flashbacks are used to show the viewer Gogol's longing for his dead father and the need for permanence in our memories, a permanence that failing human faculties do not and cannot easily support.

Before returning to India, Ashima says: "For 25 years I missed my life in India and now I will miss my life here." We are not only made of the place we were born we are also made of our livings and Ashima only discovers that when she has the opportunity to return to India. This problematic of feeling at "home" that Nair explores in some of her films shows once more her concern with different aspects that the individual has to deal with. In fact, this is a recurrent theme in some of her films. Already in 1991, when she directed her film *Mississippi Masala*, she focused on the problematic of those people who were forced to leave Uganda. Although being born in Africa, as they were descendents of Indian people who had come to Uganda to build the railway, they were forced to leave by the former dictator General Idi Amin. Mira's father struggles throughout the film to return to Uganda and when he finally achieves this, he comes to the not altogether unheard of conclusion, while writing a letter to his wife, that "Home is where the heart is and my heart is with you." However it is clearly very narrow to measure our existence only by the norms of the place where we happen to be born and Nair at the end of the film does not offer us this conventional view but something more centred in her sense of the value of family.

Some studies about immigration say that people stay in a position of 'in between', as we see in this film with Ashima, who after so many years of wanting to go home finally feels that she belongs to India and America. "The old paradigm where immigrants were seen as caught in an "either/or" dilemma, where they were forced to choose between the world of origin and the adopted land, is no longer valid. Indian Immigrants are not willing to give up either. Neither do they have any illusions about some immigrant utopia where they can blithely get the "best of both worlds" (Padma, 2000:5). However Gogol's case is different because he had never felt this duality between India and America; only after his father's death did he feel an identity crisis. Even then, there were ways of life in India that embarrassed him, like when he told Maxine that during the holidays his parents spent the whole holidays visiting other Bengali families. He also gives advice to Maxine on how to behave with his parents: "no kissing, no holding hands..." that is a natural thing while dealing with different ways of life, but he also says that: "My parents are not Lydia and Gerald. I've never seen them touch" and here Gogol in a way wishes that his parents were more like Maxine's parents.

We are able to notice that Nair throughout her career doesn't turn away from her social interests because she had already focused on immigration and the relations between people from different countries in the film *Mississippi Massala* which was also based on a friend of Mira and Taraporevala's "who was Indian and who was going out with a black man". Indeed, a lot in the film was taken from real life (Muir, 2008: 76).

Sonia dates an American boy and we see at the end of the film Gogol on a train remembering the words that the man said to his father but now they are for him: "Go, see the world, you will never regret it, Gogol." He is smiling on the train and Ashima (having foregone a singing career) returns to India to have singing lessons. The train is a symbol that Nair likes to use. Formerly, in 2002 when she and ten directors directed the film *11'09"01 September 11* in which the directors had to look to "their own cultures, their own memories, their own stories and their own language, and create a film lasting eleven minutes, nine seconds and one frame- 11'09"01-around September and its consequences" (11'09"01, 2002), this film ends with a mother watching the train as if hoping that her dead son will

return. What Nair chose to express in the film was the prejudice towards American/Indians, who were suspected of being terrorists only because their physical appearance, and when people discovered that they had helped save people in the twin towers, they were considered heroes. This film tells a story of a son of a Pakistani family that first is suspect of being a terrorist, to later be considered a hero because he sacrificed himself while trying to save others in the *twin towers*. This film is based on a true story that Nair read in the newspaper about a Pakistani woman looking for her missing son. Unfortunately it seems we are not able to look past the collective fear that many people feel because of the color of other people's skin or because of certain unfamiliar customs. This is a very problematic issue at the moment because we are having discussions throughout Europe concerning the Islamic veil (the burqa) because if, on the one hand, people have the right to wear what they want, on the other hand, they should also respect the values of the country where they live. The west has yet to resolve its views about assimilation or pluralism, and different countries pursue different strategies.

In short, *The Namesake* ends as it had started with a train, Gogol on a train. Gogol reading *The Overcoat* means that to some extent he ends up turning into his father. This analogy to Nikolai Gogol is interesting because even Nikolai when he was feeling that his life was in a way a failure because of the criticism he received of his works, ran away from Russia and according to Charles Bernheimer "this may be related to a fundamental fear of having his identity defined through the responses of his critics." In the last scene when we listen to the music and the settling of the camera slowly moving from an overall view to focus on Ashima's face in India. The tone of the song resembles suffering, but then when she finishes the song and breathes in deeply at the same time, the camera focus on her face and we see she is at peace. She finally knows how to deal with her American and Indian influences and ultimately she ends up returning to her family in India which was her first desire. Finally Ashima was no longer relegated to a supporting role. However speaking about the problems inherent to immigration, this film seems to be stronger on the individual's cultural experience than with wider social concerns about the precariousness of immigrant dislocation or about economic exploitation. Nevertheless, patriarchy is something which Nair seems unwilling to escape from.

She seems to have a fondness for Indian ways in this respect. Paternal authority is generally shown to be both benign and wise and daughters have to submit to their fathers as Aditi in part does in *Monsoon Wedding* and Ashima does in *The Namesake*. As Nair shows respect and sympathy for the responsibility that goes with patriarchy, she does not give focus to the emotional risks attendant upon such familial subordination. It is interesting that the character who cannot avoid misery is the fatherless Krishna in *Salaam Bombay!*

## Conclusion

As a director who came from a well-educated Punjabi family with no apparent economic difficulties, Nair could easily have chosen another way, but she decided to dedicate a part of her life helping other people. Making successful films has enabled her to do this. While directing her films, she follows in a way contemporary features of Indian history and she carefully avoids patronizing ( or over-simplifying it for) foreign audiences.

Although she was influenced a lot by Bollywood films and India, and we can see these influences throughout her career, as an Indian/American she was also able to direct films that had little to do with India. However the films that I have selected were precisely the ones that reflect her concern with India and Indian people. Her characters are strongly drawn ones although we have sometimes the stereotyped good/bad characters as in *Salaam Bombay's* Krishna/The Pimp or in *Monsoon Wedding's* Ria/Tej. She also tries not to be a moraliser; she often tries to see the two sides of the question as, for example, in the case of arranged marriages. She also likes to use strong dichotomies, such as reality vs. illusion in *Salaam Bombay!* or modernity vs. tradition in *Monsoon Wedding*.

In the three films which are the focus of this dissertation she speaks directly or indirectly of three different cities in India; this shows her need to address India and its diversity. In her first film she focuses on Bombay (today's Mumbai), which was where Taraporevala was born. In *Monsoon Wedding* she focuses on Dehli, which was the place where she went with her family when she was eleven and where she studied at university, and finally in *The Namesake* we have many scenes located in Calcutta. According to an interview <sup>14</sup> given by Nair, when she was asked what filming in Calcutta was like compared to New York, she answers:

“In Calcutta it's fantastic. It's about orchestrating chaos. In New York you pay for the chaos – or the chaos I like. But also in India we live in several centuries at once, in Calcutta especially. It was just fantastic to find that

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<sup>14</sup> An interview given to Rob Carnevale.

decayed mansion for Ashima. The generosity of people was amazing. These are the roads I travel all the time so it was just wonderful to be able to put it on screen.” Calcuta was also the city where she in her youth “participated in street protest theatre” (Muir, 2006:234).

Nair cannot be reduced to simply an artist of the Asian diaspora; it is unwise and limiting to categorize her in that way. Nair is a woman of the world who has clearly received influences from the country where she was born but also from her adopted country, most notably in *The Namesake* where she seems enamoured of the family patriarch, giving him an importance that is in a way at odds with Nair’s feminist leanings. In *Salaam Bombay!* where she describes the poorer parts of Mumbai and in *Monsoon Wedding* where among other things she seems to endorse the arranged marriage, she shows herself to be a woman who has suffered international influences as well and in *The Namesake* we also see that because the film has an intimate knowledge of American *mores*. (*Monsoon Wedding* is surely made with a knowledge of Robert Altman’s satirical ensemble piece *A Wedding* (1978). Nair being a liberal-leftist person who is concerned with social change and with a more egalitarian society, it is interesting to note the devotion to fathers. She foregrounds. The relations between women and men seem to be contingent rather than long-lasting. That is to say, the relation between Ashoke and Ashima works and appears to be based on mutual respect. However Ashima’s hopes and desire’s are subordinated to his during their marriage. When he dies, then she can act upon her own desires. We also have the relation between Gogol and Moushumi, where we have a more truthful and upfront Moushumi (heavily influenced by western thought) and Gogol who in a way is blinder, not admitting that he is not in love with her. Her admission that both being Punjabis is not enough to constitute a loving relationship is the voice of emancipation from tradition. Even Lalit and his wife have in a way a strange relation because they don’t usually sleep together, something that might not be acceptable to an American woman.

The endings of the three films all express hope in the future through dance, music or, more enigmatically in the case of *Salaam Bombay!*, a pregnant silence. An exotic use of colour is also a feature of Nair’s work, even enlivening the poverty

and filthiness in *Salaam Bombay!* as well as the festivities and happiness of *Monsoon Wedding*. The fact that Mira Nair's work combines Indian sensuality with western social conscience filmmaking helps to create a hybrid of eastern exoticism and western social melodrama which has proved attractive to both her audiences.

Nair has done important work in helping others through her social activism her foundations and her appeals for compassion for others and giving voice to those who live in terrible living conditions, a situation that unfortunately hasn't improved throughout the years. She has also eloquently expressed the life experiences of people like herself, who have felt the pull of different cultures and loyalty to both.



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